



CENTRAL ASIA AT THE CROSSROAD OF THE VACCINE DIPLOMACY RUSH

As it turns out, the political and economic potential of the vaccine, especially its instrumental role in foreign policy, were duly notices from the early days of its invention in the late 18th century. What would be more striking throughout history, though, was the peacekeeping, rather than confrontational, effect of the so-called “vaccine diplomacy” – a term that was coined decades ago, long before the current COVID-19 pandemic, which once more, but more vividly, brought this term into our political lexicon. As Peter J. Hotez, one of the most prominent experts on vaccine diplomacy, notices, vaccines became and efficient political tool to halt current wars, build up political influence and overcome hostilities, as we could see during the Napoleonic wars, Marshall Plan and the US-Soviet scientific collaboration during the Cold war. The current unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing and prospective economic, social and political consequences revealed a much more complicated dynamics of the globalized world, since “vaccine diplomacy” in its current state does not only mean the open-hearted collaboration of all states by putting aside national and utilitarian interests, but also well-calculated endeavors for prospective reputational, political and economic gains. This is valid not only for the states that use their vaccine development and supplies as foreign policy tools, but also for the recipients of these vaccines, as the exclusive purchase of a certain vaccine might be presented as a gesture of political loyalty or favor. Besides, the vaccine diplomacy seems to be not just a matter of foreign policy, but a decisive stance in domestic political struggle, as is evident in recent US presidential elections, since one of the first executive orders of the Biden administration was to rejoin the World Health Organizations (WHO) by overruling President Trump’s withdrawal, and increase the US contribution to the COVAX, the global vaccine-sharing initiative, from 2 billion dollars to 4 billion.

These considerations make even greater sense in the context of Central Asian politics, as the region, which was traditionally considered as the area of Russian political domination, witnesses the rapid growth of Chinese economic influence, while these two powers, Russia and China, happen to be the two most influential players in global vaccine diplomacy battle. This shifting balance and geopolitical transition, along with diverse and unique foreign policy settings of each Central Asian state, present various vaccine diplomacy options and preferences

throughout the region, based on their political, economic and social considerations.

To some extent, both China and Russia embraced the opportunity to respond to the urgent and vital global need for efficient COVID-19 vaccine, but differently from most other countries, the currently available Russian and Chinese vaccines were developed by government-controlled institutions, which made it easy to turn them into a foreign policy instrument in the hands of the governments, so that they would decide which countries would get them and on what conditions. This possibility to get prioritized access to Chinese or Russian vaccines, especially along with favorable price, volume or period, provided the governments of China and Russia with an extraordinary leverage in world politics, provided that the benefits of their policies could be derived over a long period of time. In addition, the willingness of Chinese and Russian vaccine producers to transfer technology and share production licenses, as opposed to the hesitation of Western companies to do so, made their bid more advantageous for a number of countries. Amongst these circumstances, Kazakhstan, the nominally richest Central Asian country, opted for Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, more than 20,000 of which were already imported, so that 14,000 health workers were vaccinated by February 12, while the country also agreed to produce the Russian vaccine under license in Karaganda, in Central Kazakhstan. As of today, according to reports, Kazakhstan has ordered 2 million doses of Sputnik V to be imported from Russia or its producing partners, while another 2 million doses are to be produced domestically. Despite being the biggest Chinese partners in the region along the Belt and Road Initiative, Kazakhstan, unlike other Central Asian states, decided not to place any order for Chinese vaccines so far, although it was reported that the government was at certain point in talks with Chinese vaccine producing giants Sinopharm and Sinovac. Moreover, the patriotic stance of the Kazakh government along the vaccine diplomacy lines is uttered by the endeavors to develop and produce the national vaccine, known as QazCovid, so that both the president of the country and its health minister expressed their will to wait for its completion, instead of receiving the Russian vaccine.

On the other hand, Uzbekistan, the region’s most populated country, leaned towards collaboration with China in their efforts to get access to the COVID-19 vaccine, as the country decided to participate in the Phase 3

trials of the two Chinese vaccines developed by Sinopharm and Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical. In February 2021, the special governmental commission announced that Uzbekistan would facilitate the local production of the COVID-19 vaccine developed by China’s Anhui Zhifei Longcom under the name of ZF-UZ-VAC 2001, which was patriotically designated as the Chinese-Uzbek “co-development”. Nevertheless, unlike Kazakhstan, which was actively involved in vaccine production and purchases primarily with Russia, Uzbekistan placed an order for 35 million doses of Russian Sputnik V vaccine in September last year, before turning into closer collaboration with China. However, ever since, there were no noticeable deliveries from this huge order, which far exceeds the entire population of the country.

Despite the fact that its president proudly declared the victory over COVID-19 in his New Year’s address to the nation, Tajikistan requested 1.8 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine via the COVAX initiative, which the country might not receiving before 2023, and contacted Russian officials upon the possibility of receiving Sputnik V vaccine. In the meantime, Turkmenistan became the first Central Asian country to certify Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, although the country officially declared itself COVID-19-free, and already received a “large number” of vaccines ahead of the launch of the vaccination campaign.

As for Kyrgyzstan, the smallest economy in the region, the economic impediments to facilitate the country’s access to the COVID-19 vaccines were already expressed last year. During the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Bishkek in September, the then President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbay Jeenbekov did not only appeal for the Chinese medical assistance in fight against COVID-19, including prospective vaccine supply, but also for the restructuring and prolongation of the debt repayments to China. As for the vaccine, due to economic difficulties induced by the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan seems to overly rely on external donations from Russia, China, as well as other donor institutions, as Russia already agreed to provide free of charge 500,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine, while in February, the Chinese ambassador acknowledged the donation of Chinese vaccines to Kyrgyzstan. The country also applied to the COVAX initiative and expects to receive another 500,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine for free.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkmenistan to France, Shohrat Jumayev, had a meeting with the French Senate's France-Central Asia Friendship Group. During the meeting, the parties agreed to intensify inter-parliamentary dialogue and strengthen bilateral cooperation between the countries in terms of economy, trade, culture and education. The politicians agreed to prioritize economic cooperation. It should be noted that Turkmenistan and France are implementing a two-year cooperation plan signed in April 2019 (Kabar.kg, 04.03.2021).
- The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, had a meeting with his Kyrgyz counterpart, Sadyr Zhaparov. Following the meeting, the presidents had a joint media briefing. President Tokayev mentioned that Kazakhstan remained one of the strategic partners of Kyrgyzstan. He noted that there were almost 180 agreements between the countries and they successfully cooperated in terms of investments, trade, customs regulation and transboundary rivers. He added that Kazakhstan would continue to provide humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan (Inform.kz, 02.03.2021).
- Azerbaijan's Defense Minister, Zakir Hasanov, and Pakistan's Chief of General Staff, General Nadeem Raza announced that they were planning to deepen military cooperation between the two countries. In particular, the parties will focus on military-technical and educational aspects. They expressed satisfaction with the current level of political interaction. At the same time, they agreed to conduct joint military exercises with the involvement of various types of troops (AzerNews, 04.03.2021).
- The U.S. Department of Defense announced a new \$125 million aid package for Ukraine to improve the country's defense capability. The funds are allocated to support Ukraine's security and will be used to train fighters, purchase equipment, send military advisers, secure its borders and improve interoperability with NATO. Since 2014, the U.S. has committed more than \$2 billion in security assistance to Ukraine (Ukrinform.net, 02.03.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Davit Zalkaliani, held a closed-door meeting with the Vice President of Turkey, Fuat Oktay, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu. The sides discussed the ways of enhancement of commercial ties under the free trade agreement and agreed on intensifying efforts on the railway-corridor project to connect Asia and Europe. Vice President Oktay congratulated the new Georgian government and invited Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, to visit Turkey (Aa.com.tr, 03.03.2021).
- Turkey and Kazakhstan celebrated the 29th anniversary of diplomatic relations on March 2. Turkey was among the first countries to recognize the independence of Kazakhstan. The two countries cooperate extensively in the fields of trade, investment, culture, tourism, health, education and military issues. The total amount of Turkish investments made in Kazakhstan has reached \$3.2 billion. Despite the coronavirus crisis, the bilateral trade exceeded \$3 billion (Dailysabah.com, 02.03.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Kazakhstan plans to transform its petrochemical industry by developing the 2025 national petrochemical project. The country's Energy Minister, Nurlan Nogayev, announced that the project would address different problematic issues of the sector, including the provision of petrochemical materials and the creation of a petrochemical cluster. The government plans to launch five plants by 2025, which will increase the production of petrochemical products by nine times to 2 million tons. The projects will attract investments worth \$3.9 billion (Inform.kz, 05.03.2021).
- Kazakhstan will increase gas production at the Kashagan oilfield. The country plans to construct a new plant with a capacity of 1,150 billion cubic meters of raw gas. The project requires investments worth \$860 million. The plant will increase gas production by 800 million cubic meters and will positively contribute to oil production. Currently, pilot and industrial development stages produce 280 thousand barrels a day due to imposed restrictions, while their daily capacity equals 400 thousand barrels (Inform.kz, 05.03.2021).
- Energy cooperation between Russia and India is deepening. Recently, India opened its Energy Center in Moscow and the two countries agreed to establish a new working group on energy interaction. It is expected that the Center and the working group will boost mutual investments. Moreover, they will stimulate the development of joint projects such as liquid natural gas and oil production in new regions. Department heads of energy ministries from both countries will coordinate the work (TASS.com, 02.03.2021).
- Uzbekistan intends to become a new hub of electric scooter production. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree to provide subsidies and benefits to electrical industry producers. The production cluster will be developed on the territory of the free economic zone of Kokand. Three major companies such as Bicycle Trading Invest, Velomax and Technoworld will invest \$8.5 million. It is expected that their joint annual production will reach 26,500 vehicles (UzReport.news, 05.03.2021).
- Kyrgyzstan continues to experience growth in fuel prices. According to the Director of the State Agency for Antimonopoly Regulation, Shukhrat Sabirov, oil and lubricant prices in Kyrgyzstan increased by 10-15% over a month. Sabirov explains that this tendency has a global scale and is mainly driven by increasing oil prices. Even though Kyrgyzstan remains an import-dependent country, it does not experience a fuel shortage. All needed fuel will be provided for spring field works (Kabar.kg, 05.03.2021).
- Recently, the Minister of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan, Zavqi Zavqizoda, had an online meeting with Shanny Campbell, Asian Development Bank's (ADB) newly appointed Country Director for Tajikistan. The parties discussed the possibilities of increasing financial support for Tajikistan to implement anti-crisis measures. In particular, the Tajik government asked to support its programs on economic, digital and export development until 2025. The parties agreed to expand the cooperation. In total, the ADB has supported Tajikistan by allocating \$2.2 billion in assistance during 23 years (Asiaplustj.info, 04.03.2021).

Society and Culture

- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is extending a state loan of up to €7.5 million to a Tajik state-owned company, which will rehabilitate key water and sanitation infrastructure in Tajikistan's fourth-largest city of Kulob. The project will receive grant support from the European Union's (EU) Investment Facility for Central Asia (IFCA) and a technical assistance package, approved by IFCA and EBRD's Shareholder Special Fund. The project will improve water supply and water treatment services to over 100,000 inhabitants of the city (Asiaplustj.info, 03.03.2021).
- A Kazakh delegation headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, Yeraly Tugzhanov, paid a two-day visit to Tashkent. During the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister met with his Uzbek counterpart, Behzod Musesayev, to discuss joint measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Kazakh delegation shared the interim results of the QazCovid-in vaccine, which is currently in the third phase of clinical trials. The sides also discussed the elaboration of an agreement between the Healthcare Ministries of the two countries that would foster bilateral cooperation in the healthcare sector (Astanatimes.com, 05.03.2021).
- The Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan in Russia, Gulnara-Klara Samat, met with the First Deputy Minister of Education of Russia, Dmitry Glushko, to discuss issues related to the agreements reached during the recent visit of the Kyrgyz President, Sadyr Zhaparov, to Russia. The sides focused on issues of cooperation in education such as the implementation of the project "Russian Teacher Abroad", the provision of Kyrgyz educational institutions with Russian textbooks etc. Gulnara-Klara Samat also asked for assistance in secondary vocational education for children of migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan (Kabar.kg, 03.03.2021).
- The Head of Media and Communications Directorate of the Turkish Presidency, Fahrettin Altun, received the Minister of Culture of Azerbaijan, Anar Karimov. The sides discussed ways to intensify collaboration in communication, media, culture and cinema. A recent publication on Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, prepared by the directorate in three languages, was noted as an example symbolizing brotherly relations between the countries (Hurriyetdailynews.com, 03.03.2021).
- A monograph entitled "Azerbaijan on the Silk Road" was published in English and Russian at the initiative and with the support of the International Fund of Turkic Culture and Heritage. The book is the first large academic publication based on scientific research about the history of Azerbaijan on the Great Silk Road. The publication of the book is part of the large-scale international project "Turkic-Speaking States on the Great Silk Road", which is being implemented by the Foundation (Azertag.az, 05.03.2021).
- Turkey opened a new Consulate General in the Uzbek city of Samarkand. The opening ceremony was attended by the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Aziz Abdulkhakimov, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the two countries, Abdulaziz Kamilov and Mevlut Cavusoglu. The new diplomatic mission will work on the development of investment, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkey (Uzdaily.uz, 07.03.2021).