

**“Loveable” China in times of COVID-19  
China’s “Vaccine Diplomacy” in Southeast  
Asia**

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Her book “Finding India in China: Travels to the Lesser Known” was published in Singapore, in 2015 and has featured at several literary festivals such as Beijing Bookworm Festival and Singapore Writers Festival. She has also published more than 150 + articles in Bangkok Post, Prachatai & Nation (Thailand), Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), Channel News Asia (Singapore) and Journal of Contemporary Asia (Manila). Within India, she has written in Economic and Political Weekly (Mumbai), Global Affairs (Mumbai) and Indian Management (Delhi). She was a regular writer at Business Standard (Delhi) from 2007-2011 and at the Financial Express (Delhi) 2011-2020. Anurag continues to write for several publications including the Times of India (Delhi).

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## **“Loveable” China in times of COVID-19**

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#### **Abstract**

China’s economic muscle and footprint has been on the rise in the world. So has China’s outreach of its foreign policy. But proportionately, China’s soft power has been on the decline. Despite being a ‘rising’ power, there has been a visible global pushback and backlash to both China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as its “go-out” foreign policy. But today, China has a new policy thrust, a corrective to make China “lovable”. The effort is envisaged to rectify, correct and reverse the backlash of China’s BRI, “go-out” policy and low soft-power. How is “Lovable” China manifesting in policy and practice particularly in Southeast Asia? This paper seeks to focus on “Lovable” China in the context of China’s “vaccine diplomacy” — why it emerged, how it is shaping and evolving, the role it is playing and the reactions that it has garnered in Southeast Asia.

#### **Keywords**

China, COVID-19, Vaccine Diplomacy, Soft Power, “Lovable” China, Sinovac, Sinopharm, Southeast Asia.

## Introduction

In times of COVID-19, China's foreign policy under President Xi Jinping has a new focus – to be “lovable”. In May 2021, at a study group session of the political bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi made a speech calling for a confident China to be modest and humble and work hard on building a “reliable, loveable and respectable” image of China (努力塑造可信、可爱、可敬的中国形象).<sup>1</sup> All countries want to be “loveable”, but none explicitly spell it out. This paper argues how China's tryst with “loveability” is translating into a diplomatic “soft power” initiative and strategic opportunity via “vaccine diplomacy” in China's “sphere of influence” Southeast Asia. In general, China's initiative and assistance is welcome, but efficacy questions, price-point and perception of superiority of Western vaccines have been stumbling blocks.

## Why “loveable” China?

The context to China wanting to be “loveable” has come in the face of China rising in economic heft but not popular appeal. China's appeal is falling short, undercut by global political and economic anxieties about China's rise, its forays in the South China and East China Sea and Doklam and increasing controversy over China's investments under the rubric of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 2013). The wariness about China is surprising given that since Xi's rise to power (in 2012), Xi has engaged with the larger world diplomatically, politically and economically.

Under Xi, China has spearheaded the first multi-lateral institution, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 2016) set up with an initial capital of \$50 billion, with 57 countries including West European countries such as the U.K, France and Germany signing up as founding members. Xi's flagship BRI (2013) “China's version of economic globalization” has envisaged six international economic corridors backed by investment. With Xi in command,

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<sup>1</sup> 习近平：讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音 (Xi Jinping: Jiang Hao Zhongguo Gushi, Chuanbo Hao Zhongguo Gushi), China Daily, June 3, 2021, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/03/WS60b82646a3101e7ce9753238.html> (date of access July 30, 2021)

China has sought to address the needs of developing Asia which the Asian Development Bank (2017) estimated at \$1.5-1.7 trillion per year. Xi has spearheaded the New Development Bank (formerly BRICS Bank, 2014) to help emerging and developing economies. Xi took the idea of “we are not alone in the Great Way, and under the sky one family”(大道不孤，天下一家) further articulating it as “shared destiny for mankind” (2013). It is Xi who has called for vaccines being a “global public good”.

But these have clearly not been enough or have been dented by the turns in China’s foreign policy. Xi’s predecessors had initiated China’s drift from the decades long “bide its time” (韬光养晦) to “go out” (走出去). Whilst long in the making, under Xi, this has manifested with claims in the East China and South China Sea, frayed relations with India and several other countries such as Taiwan and Lithuania. What has stirred the hornet’s nest is China’s increasingly strident diplomacy, the so-called “wolf-warrior” diplomats active on social media who have unknowingly compounded China’s negative image.

### **China’s negative image**

That China has a negative image has been corroborated by the recent Pew Research Centre’s Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey. The survey which polled 19,000 people in 17 advanced economies in Asia Pacific, Europe and North America showed that a majority continued to view China negatively. In the Asia Pacific, a median of 73 percent viewed China negatively; in Japan nine out of ten viewed China negatively and in Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan, two thirds viewed China negatively.<sup>2</sup>

This can be partly tracked to China’s “wolf-warrior” diplomats. There have been several instances in which China’s diplomats have overstepped the norms of diplomatic engagement. In March 2021, the Chinese Ambassador to France, Lu Shaye took to Twitter calling out China specialist Antoine Bondaz from the Foundation for Strategic Research (a think-tank) as a “small time hoodlum”, “crazed hyena” and an “ideological troll”. Bondaz had complained

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<sup>2</sup> Clarissa Young, “S’poreans view China in a better light: Global poll”, *The Straits Times*, July1, 2021

about China's pressure on French lawmakers who were considering a trip to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> In the same month, in another incident Hua Chunying, the head of the Information Department at the Chinese foreign ministry shared a picture on Twitter comparing Mississippi cotton workers to Uyghur workers in Xinjiang with the tweet:

“#Mississippi in 1908 vs #Xinjiang in 2015  
A shotgun and several hounds vs smiles and harvests.  
Forced labour?”

Such gathered more backlash than diplomatic dividends.

China's engagement on social media has attracted attention. According to the working paper titled “China's Public Diplomacy Operations” in May 2021, lead researcher Marcel Schliebs and his co-authors (at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford) suggested that Chinese actors were employing social media to “amplify the outward facing propaganda dissemination of state-backed media outlets”. Together with the Associated Press' Global Investigations Team, the researchers carried out data collection and analysis of every tweet and Facebook post of China's diplomats and ten of the largest state-controlled media outlets between June 2020 and February 2021.

Based on this, the researchers calculated that Chinese diplomats tweeted 201,382 times (averaging 778 times a day) receiving 7 million likes, 1.3 million retweets and 1 million comments. However, a large number of the likes, half of all PRC diplomats retweets and comments was generated by a small number of active accounts making such engagement suspect.<sup>4</sup> In another detailed report titled “China's Inauthentic UK Twitter Diplomacy: A Coordinated Network Amplifying PRC Diplomats” they concluded that this was possible because of coordinated account creation (created within minutes of each other), coordinated

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<sup>3</sup> *France 24*, “France summons Chinese ambassador over “unacceptable” tweets”, 23 March 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210323-france-summons-chinese-ambassador-over-unacceptable-tweets> (date of access, August 28, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *Oxford Internet Institute*, “New study finds Chinese actors using social media networks to influence foreign public opinion”, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news/releases/new-study-finds-chinese-actors-using-social-media-networks-to-influence-foreign-public-opinion/> (date of access August 28, 2021).

account use, coordinated interaction displaying tendency to use or replicate consistent phrases, speeches or commentary from the three most prominent Twitter accounts in London.<sup>5</sup>

In early 2020, China's image had taken a beating because of the secrecy and manner in which China disseminated information about the outbreak of COVID-19. The Wuhan laboratory leak hypothesis, that the virus escaped from a laboratory made it worse. Towards the end of 2020, China was able to spring back with control over the COVID-19 outbreak and regained economic health.

This year, in 2021, China has been accused of carrying out a disinformation campaign to discredit the US. Critics say that China is deflecting blame for the Wuhan outbreak, tracing and placing the blame on a virus leak on a (military) research facility in Fort Derrick, Md. China has pointed to closures of the military lab in August 2019 and deaths at a nursing home in July 2019<sup>6</sup> which has been echoed by China's state officials and media. In fact, China has accused the US of "origin tracing terrorism" — saying that the US accusation that China created the virus in a laboratory was tantamount to terrorism as it caused "unnecessary horror to society".<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, Xi is no longer side-stepping the issue of China's negative image but addressing it. In his May 2021 speech, Xi emphasized that there was a propaganda war (舆论斗争) and a need for a competing Chinese narrative. Xi encouraged the cadre to tell "China's story well" (讲好中国故事).<sup>8</sup>

How can China tell its "story well" and be "loveable"? In times of COVID-19, when cases are surging across the world, China's opportunity to tell its "story well", manage its negative image

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<sup>5</sup> Marcel Schliebs, Hannah Bailey Jonathan Bright Philip N. Howard, "China's Inauthentic UK Twitter Diplomacy A Coordinated Network Amplifying PRC Diplomats", DEM.Tech Working Paper, *Oxford Internet Institute*, University of Oxford, May 11 2021, <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/05/Chinas-Inauthentic-UK-Twitter-Diplomacy-Dem.Tech-Working-Paper-2021.2-2.pdf> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Austin Ramzy and Amy Chang Chien, "Beijing sows virus theory: U.S. military lab is villain", *The New York Times*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The same NYT article quoted Dr Michael Ryan, a WHO official as saying "It is slightly contradictory if colleagues in China are saying that the lab leak hypothesis is unfounded in the context of China, but we now need to go and do laboratory investigations in other countries for leaks there". NYT, Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> China Daily, June3, 2021, Ibid.



and foster goodwill “loveable”— the opening that China needed may have (accidentally) come by way of the pandemic — via China’s “vaccine diplomacy”.

### **China in lead of “vaccine diplomacy”**

COVID-19 vaccine is novel, as is “vaccine diplomacy”, essentially a response to the pandemic. Vaccines are the critical need of the times as countries struggle to contain the spread of COVID-19 and its variants. Vaccines are not only the new necessity but as the pandemic continues emerged as the new tool of diplomacy. China has, as have other countries, taken recourse to this.

It is debatable whether China’s “vaccine diplomacy” began as a carefully strategized policy or whether it was the accidental outcome in response to the needs of the times. The genesis of China’s “vaccine diplomacy” can be traced to when it took lead over vaccine production and supply. China’s success gave China the opportunity to re-position itself, extricate itself from the stigma of being the country where the outbreak began to a global stakeholder, ready to play a global role.

Several factors culminated to propel China as the lead player in “vaccine diplomacy”. As a manufacturing powerhouse, China has always been an important player in Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and pharmaceutical intermediates such as unbranded chemical active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). According to the United Nations trade statistics, in August 2020, China supplied 83 percent of the major PPE — masks, gowns, protective clothing and glasses, a figure which grew sharply from 50 percent in January 2020. The US, EU and Japan, for instance, received 80-90 percent of imported gowns from China in May, up from 40-60 percent in January.<sup>9</sup> China produces and exports 40 percent of the global APIs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tasei Hoyoma and Rintaro Hosokawa, “Reliance on Chinese protective gear soars in pandemic’s wake”, *Nikkei Asia*, August 24, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Reliance-on-Chinese-protective-gear-soars-in-pandemic-s-wake> (date of access September 5, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> *Daxue Consulting*, ‘The API Industry in China: Producing and exporting to the global market’, July 1 2020, <https://daxueconsulting.com/api-industry-in-china/> (date of access September 1, 2021).

As the pandemic surged, vaccines were still in the making. In February 2020, China's CanSino Biologics had a vaccine in place, using the adenovirus vector 5 (Ad5), ready to enter clinical trials, narrowly ahead of Western players such as Moderna. The other two players, Sinovac Biotech and China National Biotech Group (CNBG), a subsidiary of state owned Sinopharm used the inactivated virus to make the vaccine. The vaccine made by Sinopharm was approved for public use in December 2020 and Sinovac was approved in February 2021. Sinovac was granted emergency authorization by Indonesia, Turkey, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, and Laos.<sup>11</sup> Sinopharm and Sinovac were granted emergency approval by the WHO in May-June 2021.

China's lead came by default too. As the pandemic unfolded, the US followed a "me-first" or "America-First-ism" vaccination policy pumping \$10.8 billion into "Operation Warp Speed" for accelerated vaccine R&D and promise to buy vaccines to address US needs. As the US looked inwards, China looked outwards – low number of cases and COVID-19 under control, China could afford to manufacture and export vaccines. China's head start in "vaccine diplomacy" offered a sharp contrast to US's "vaccine nationalism".<sup>12</sup>

In April 2020, the COVAX, one of the three pillars of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator was launched to facilitate equitable distribution of vaccines. This initiative was led by a coalition of the World Health Organisation, Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), and Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI)<sup>13</sup>. While President Donald Trump halted funding to the WHO and announced withdrawal from the WHO in July 2021, China got onboard the COVAX scheme as early as October 2020.

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<sup>11</sup> *Reuters*, "China approves Sinovac Biotech COVID-19 vaccine for general public use", February 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vaccine-sinovac-idUSKBN2A60AY> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Jon Cohen "With global push for COVID-19 vaccines, China aims to win friends and cut deals", *Science*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.science.org/news/2020/11/global-push-covid-19-vaccines-china-aims-win-friends-and-cut-deals> (date of access September 6, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> *The Straits Times*, "World passes three billion COVID-19 vaccine mark", June 29, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/world-passes-three-billion-covid-19-vaccine-mark> (date of access August 19, 2021).

China did not face competition from pharmaceutical companies in other countries either. India made a headway with vaccine production. In early 2021, India despatched one million vaccines to Nepal, two million to Bangladesh, 150,000 to Bhutan, 100,000 to Maldives and 1.5 million to Myanmar. But India's halted its vaccine exports in April 2021 due to domestic pressure and troubles.

India, the leading manufacturer of vaccines, had to withdraw due to the export ban in India following a huge surge in cases. Instead, the vaccines had to be geared to meet the demands of India's huge population.

India's Serum Institute of India (SII) which manufactures Covishield (AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured in India) was the top supplier of vaccines to COVAX and one of the largest vaccine manufacturers in the world. But the SII was beleaguered with unforeseen problems: from a fire at the factory to limited production capacity; from funding to bureaucratic hurdles. Finally, came the ban on exports due to surge of caseloads due to the delta variant. The US Defence Production Act (emergency powers that enable the government to control private sector production decisions) had placed an embargo on raw materials exported to SII which impacted the production of vaccines.

In comparison, China's domestic vaccine players and research were feted and supported by the state — though researchers have not been able to tell how much state funding has gone into research.<sup>14</sup>

China's vaccines were deemed suitable for low income or middle-income countries as typically, these countries do not have cold-chain capabilities. Cold-chain capabilities include freezer warehouses, refrigerated truck and onsite freezers. Both Pfizer and Moderna vaccine developed in the West, based on mRNA technologies require to be kept at sub-zero temperatures unlike Sinovac and Sinopharm which can be stored and shipped at temperatures ranging from 2 to 8 degrees Celsius.

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<sup>14</sup> Flynn Murphy, "Inside China's response to COVID-19", *Nature*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03361-7> (date of access September 5, 2021).

These combined factors propelled China in the lead – as the exporter and supplier of vaccines in Asia. According to Yanzhong Huang, director of the Centre for Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey and Council of Foreign Relations, China leaned on “vaccines to promote the diplomacy of foreign policy objectives”. In contrast to US, Xi committed to making China-made vaccines a “global public good”.<sup>15</sup>

By November 2020, China brokered deals with 15 countries on 5 continents. AP news quoted China as saying that it had supplied “vaccine aid” to 53 countries (for free, such as developing countries in Africa and strategically important countries such as Philippines and Pakistan) and exports to 27 (but did not give the list).<sup>16</sup> The key linchpin in China’s “vaccine diplomacy” was vaccine.<sup>17</sup>

China’s speedy manufacturing capabilities and vaccine stock reached several countries including Southeast Asia, China’s “sphere of influence”. Many of these countries had failed to order vaccines from the West or given the scarcity, failed to procure vaccines. Many countries would have preferred Pfizer or Moderna if they had a choice, but given that there was none, they turned to China.

According to the BBC<sup>18</sup>, as of 13 July 21, an estimated 174 countries are using Oxford-AstraZeneca, 102 countries Pfizer, 52 countries Moderna and 47 countries Sputnik. In comparison, 64 countries are using Sinopharm, 34 countries are using Sinovac and 4 countries CanSino (102 countries).

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<sup>15</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, “They Relied on Chinese Vaccines. Now They’re Battling Outbreaks”, *New York Times*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/business/economy/china-vaccines-covid-outbreak.html> (date of access September 5, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Huizhong Wu and Kristen Gelineau, “China’s vaccines sweep much of the world despite concerns”, *AP news*, March 2, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-vaccines-worldwide-0382aefa52c75b834fbaf6d869808f51> (date of access August 30, 2021) and Suisheng Zhao, “Why China’s diplomacy is winning”, *East Asia Forum*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/29/why-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-is-winning/> (date of access August 31, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Tessa Wong, “Is China’s vaccine success waning in Asia”, *BBC*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57845644> (date of access August 19, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> *BBC*, “What do we know about China’s coronavirus vaccines”, July 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57817591> (date of access August 19, 2021).

The Global Times says China has delivered 750 million vaccine doses to 104 countries (in comparison, the Global Times says that the US has delivered 110 million doses to 64 countries). The Global Times also says that China has committed to supply 2 billion doses in 2021 and a 100 million to COVAX.<sup>19</sup>

China's COVID-19 cases were low and situation under control, had resources, ready to go vaccines, vaccine-makers had state backing and China had the diplomatic and commercial zeal to tap into the opportunity to shore up its goodwill and influence. Not only did China strike deals with economies such as Brazil and Indonesia to conduct clinical trials but also offer loans to fund vaccine procurement.<sup>20</sup> Many countries opted for China's vaccines as they were deemed safe developed through the traditional route employing the inactivated virus.

### **China and Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia is considered China's "sphere of influence". Some countries in the region have a large number of ethnic Chinese —from a majority in Singapore (more than 70 percent) to lower numbers in Brunei. Xi's "China Dream" is regarded as an inclusive concept advocating *luoye guigen* (落叶归根).<sup>21</sup> This has resonated in the region. A number of countries in the region administer China-made vaccines.

Despite being China's "sphere of influence", Southeast Asia has a complex relationship with China. On one hand, most of these countries have strong economic ties with China, but equally, strong security ties with the US. The US has an active presence, and the region has to contend with strong US-China strategic rivalry. Many of the Southeast Asian countries are claimants in

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<sup>19</sup> Leng Shumei, Hu Yuwei, "China to provide 2 billion doses of vaccine to the world", *The Global Times*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1230714.shtml> (date of access 20 August 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Saheli Roy Choudhary, "How COVID-19 vaccines can shape China and India's global influence", January 28, 2021, CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/29/how-covid-19-vaccines-can-shape-china-and-indias-global-influence.html> (date of access August 31, 2021)

<sup>21</sup> Leo Suryadinata, "A Rising China Affects Ethnic Identities in Southeast Asia", ISEAS Perspective, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, June 3, 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-74-a-rising-china-affects-ethnic-identities-in-southeast-asia-by-leo-suryadinata/> (date of access August 31, 2021).

the long-standing South China Sea dispute and in conflict with China. Many other countries such as Singapore and Philippines have important defence pacts with the US. At the same time, China and ASEAN are each other's largest trading partner.

The US defence secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to the region in July 2021, reinforced the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. Delivering the Fullerton Lecture at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Singapore, Austin reinforced the importance of the region as "allies, partners and friends" with the US hope of "vision of deterrence that will meet the security challenges here in Southeast Asia and across the Indo-Pacific" as well as "coming together as Pacific states to build a free and open region". Lloyd Austin clearly sent out the message:

*"Now, the vaccines developed in the United States are medical miracles. They're incredibly effective at saving lives and preventing serious illness. And you know what...They're free. No conditions. No small print. And no strings attached. Because this is an emergency. And that's what friends do."*

The importance of the region received a further boost with the visit of the Vice President Kamala Harris in August 2021. Whilst the VP emphasised that US engagement in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific was not against any country nor deemed to make anyone choose between countries,<sup>22</sup> the VP accused China of undermining the rules-based order and posing a threat to the "sovereignty of nations" in the South China Sea. The VP used phrases such as "freedom of the seas", "international rules-based order" and that common interests were not a "zero-sum game" — all of which raised a flag in China's political playbook.

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Wong, "China-US relations : Beijing hits out at American credibility as Kamala Harris moves to reassure Asia", *The South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3146225/china-us-relations-beijing-hits-out-american-credibility> (date of access September 10, 2021).

International media covered the visit with “In Southeast Asia, Kamala Harris Rebukes China” (NYT)<sup>23</sup>, “US Vice President ends Asia tour with a jab on China” (Al Jazeera)<sup>24</sup> — headlines that referenced China’s “bullying” in the region.

However, the South China Morning Post carried a different perspective with the headline “Kamala Harris’ Southeast Asia visit draws the ire of Chinese netizens” where it carried the reaction of Chinese netizens. Apparently, Chinese netizens derided Singapore with aphorisms “bootlicker” and “running dog for Americans”.<sup>25</sup>

For China and the US, the stakes in Southeast Asia are high. Southeast Asia is critical in the strategic and geo-political rivalry with both the US and China wanting the upper hand in the region. In times of COVID-19, for both, the cooperation and goodwill has translated into upping the ante with “vaccine diplomacy”.

### **China’s “vaccine diplomacy” in Southeast Asia**

In 2020, the COVID-19 situation in Southeast Asia was largely in control. But in 2021, it was a different story. In May-June 2021, Southeast Asia overtook India as the epicentre of COVID-19 with more cases on a population adjusted basis or per million people. Cases surged, hospitals became overcrowded, shortage of oxygen tanks and increased deaths reported.

Vietnam which had skirted cases in 2020 had to place curbs. Singapore which had closely regulated and controlled the spread experienced a spike in cases. In Myanmar, the situation worsened and in Indonesia, caseloads surged. Several countries in the region such as Singapore,

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<sup>23</sup> Zolan Kanno Youngs, “In Southeast Asia, Kamala Harris’s Message: You Can Count on the U.S.”, *New York Times*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/world/asia/kamala-harris-singapore-vietnam.html> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “US Vice President Harris ends Asia tour with fresh jab at China”, August 27, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/27/vp-harris-vows-us-will-speak-up-on-south-china-sea> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Maria Siow, “Kamala Harris’ Southeast Asia visit draws the ire of Chinese netizens”, *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3146094/kamala-harris-southeast-asia-visit-draws-ire-chinese-netizens> (date of access September 2, 2021).

Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Taiwan employ China-made vaccines, Sinovac or Sinopharm.

China prioritised Southeast Asia with “vaccine diplomacy” due to strategic calculations, hoping as researcher Allison Sherlock says, to “repair relations strained by tensions” in the South China Sea. Southeast Asia ordered 203 million Chinese-made vaccines, 25.6 percent of China’s commercial commitments and received 7.3 million donations (of the 25 million doses of donation) making for 29 percent of China’s vaccine donations. Indonesia was the largest customer (125 million), followed by Philippines (25 million), Thailand (18.6 million), Cambodia (18.5 million) and Malaysia (15.5 million).<sup>26</sup>

But in practice, China’s “vaccination diplomacy” is playing out differently in different countries in the region.

### **China’s “vaccine diplomacy” — Singapore**

China’s “vaccination diplomacy” can be illustrated with reference to how the countries in the region are responding to China’s overtures. While there is no systematic data on number of China’s vaccines in the region (as the situation is evolving) and efficacy trials (in Indonesia, Brazil, Turkey), responses of the governments in Southeast Asia and media coverage on attitudes towards China’s vaccines provide an insight and understanding into the responses towards China’s “vaccine diplomacy”.

In Singapore, vaccination progressed rapidly since Singapore received Pfizer vaccines in December 2020.<sup>27</sup> Singapore received 200,000 thousand Sinovac jabs in February 2021 because of advanced purchase of the vaccine. However, Sinovac was subject to approval by the

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<sup>26</sup> Khairulanwar Zaini, “China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia – A Mixed Record”, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-86-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia-a-mixed-record-by-khairulanwar-zaini/> (date of access September 4, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Singapore Government, “What you should know about the COVID-19 vaccine”, December 30, 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-covid-19-vaccine> (date of access 24 August 2021).



Health Sciences Authority (HSA).<sup>28</sup> The HSA was unable to give its approval as it awaited detailed data.

Subsequently, both Sinovac and Sinopharm have not been included in the national health vaccination program. Instead, the national vaccination programme chose to administer Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

In June 2021, Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) allowed Sinovac under Special Access Route (SAR).<sup>29</sup> The SAR was applicable to vaccines approved by the WHO under Emergency Use List (EUL) but not authorised by the Pandemic SAR (PSAR) by the HSA. Those who chose to receive Sinovac were not eligible for the Vaccine Injury Financial Assistance (Vifap) in case of adverse reactions such as anaphylactic shock nor were considered as fully vaccinated. Those who had received the Sinovac jab were allowed in meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, but only after pre-testing (which was not applicable to those who had taken the Pfizer or Moderna jab).

It is speculated that Singapore's refusal to include Sinovac may have led to pressure from China. In March 2021, in an interview with Talking Business Asia (BBC) PM Lee Hsien Loong was asked whether Singapore was under pressure from China to use China-made vaccines. PM Lee diplomatically skirted the question saying that "vaccines do not carry nationality" and that China "no doubt was capable of making good vaccines"<sup>30</sup> but would be used only if proved safe.

New regulations announced in August 2021 ruled that those who had received Sinovac or Sinopharm were to be regarded as fully vaccinated (after having completed the vaccine regimen). As of September 2021, only private care health institutions can administer Sinovac

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<sup>28</sup> Clara Chong, "Singapore has received 200,000 doses of Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine: use subject to HAS approval", *The Straits Times*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-has-received-200000-doses-of-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-use-subject-to-hsa-approval> (date of access 24 September 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Goh, "MOH allows special access to Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine through private healthcare sector," June 4, 2021, *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/sinovac-approved-under-special-access-route-moh> (date of access 25 August 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Justin Ong, "Singapore not under pressure to accelerate vaccine programme due to low community cases: PM Lee", *Today Online*, 14 March 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spore-not-under-pressure-accelerate-vaccine-programme-due-low-community-cases-pm-lee> (date of access August 25, 2021).

(31 clinics in total) and Sinopharm will be made available by private health providers from 1 September, 2021.

### **China’s “vaccine diplomacy”— Indonesia**

Indonesia, a nation of 270 million has witnessed very high number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the highest in Southeast Asia — peaking at 54,000 cases a day and 2000 deaths in the region in mid-July 2021. Indonesia’s predicted worst-case scenario was 40,000 cases but this has been breached several times. In the first week of August 2021, Indonesia joined countries such as Brazil and India that lost more than 100,000 lives in the pandemic.<sup>31</sup>

Indonesia engaged in comprehensive vaccine cooperation with China — from conducting trials (from August 2020) to receiving vaccines (December 2020) to administering vaccines (January 2021). The first shot was taken by PM Joko Widodo (in January 2021).

Reports suggest that a little more than one third of Indonesia’s vaccines is from China, 38 percent of the total orders of 330 million.<sup>32</sup> Until March 2021, China had provided 60 million jabs of Sinovac. The shots were prioritised and first administered to 1.3 million health workers, following which 17.4 million frontline workers received the shots.<sup>33</sup> However, despite vaccination Indonesia witnessed a rising number of doctor deaths. The Voice of America (VOA) reported 545 doctor deaths (general practitioners, obstetricians, internists and surgeons) since the beginning of the pandemic. A large number of health care workers including 445

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<sup>31</sup> Yudith Ho, “Indonesia Becomes Second in Asia to Hit 100,000 Covid Deaths”, Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-04/indonesia-covid-deaths-surpass-100-000-in-southeast-asia-s-first>(date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Ardhyta Eduard Yeremia and Klaus Heinrich Raditio, “ Indonesia-China vaccine cooperation and South China Sea diplomacy”, *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 2021, No, 55, ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, Singapore, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-55-indonesia-china-vaccine-cooperation-and-south-china-sea-diplomacy-by-ardhyta-eduard-yeremia-and-klaus-heinrich-raditio/> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Linda Yulisman, “Indonesia starts nationwide Sinovac COVID-19”, *The Straits Times*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-starts-nationwide-sinovac-vaccine-distribution-media> (date of access August 31, 2021).

nurses, 42 pharmacists, 223 midwives and 25 laboratory workers have died.<sup>34</sup> According to a citizen data platform LaporCOVID-19, more than a thousand (vaccinated) health workers have died from COVID-19. Novilia Sjafri Bachtiar, the lead scientist on Sinovac trials died of suspected COVID-19.

The deaths of vaccinated health workers led to doubts regarding the efficacy of the vaccines. In mid-July 2021, Indonesia received 8 million Moderna vaccines from the US subsequently administered to frontline workers; Indonesia further received 50 million doses of Pfizer in August 2021.<sup>para</sup>

Indonesia is currently embracing a “mix and match” model — those inoculated with Sinovac are now taking booster shots of mRNA vaccines. Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia and Klaus Heinrich Raditio suggest that Sinovac and other diversified sources constitute a part of the short-term vaccination strategy, until indigenous resources are mobilised. Eijkman Institute (currently developing a COVID-19 vaccine) is a frontrunner.<sup>35</sup>

### **Thailand and China’s “vaccine diplomacy”**

Thailand’s widely deployment of Sinovac is mired in controversy that has spilled on to the streets in street protests – protests that demand the resignation of the PM Prayuth Chan-ocha and better-quality vaccines. Thailand, a nation of 66 million received the first batch of Sinovac vaccines in February 2021. Vaccination is low with nine percent fully vaccinated by August 2021.

The decision to bank on Sinovac was taken by the military junta. The junta is considered an ally of China which neither criticised the coup nor the subsequent political turmoil in Thailand. Thais are deeply distrustful of China’s goods. Political engagement with China rankles young, urban Thais. Thais have also shown a clear preference for Western Vaccines —evident in

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<sup>34</sup> Eva Mazrieva, “Indonesian Doctors Dying of COVID-19 Amid Surge”, *Voice of America*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/indonesian-doctors-dying-covid-19-amid-surge> (date of access September 2, 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia and Klaus Heinrich Raditio, *Ibid*, p.6

social media platforms and the press. When Phayathai Hospital in Bangkok opened bookings on Shopee (e-commerce platform) for Moderna vaccines, they were sold out within minutes.

It is this trifecta of polarisation — China-made vaccines, China and the junta’s decision to administer Sinovac that spilled onto the streets. Protestors took to home-made bombs, motorcycle rallies and car convoy rallies to express their distrust of the government and its vaccination strategy.

Protests in Thailand were buttressed by empirical data reported in the press and on social media. One was a joint study undertaken between Thammasat University and the National Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (Biotech) which found that antibody levels in fully vaccinated people (Sinovac) halves every 40 days.<sup>36</sup> This was corroborated by the head of intensive care unit at Vichaiyut Hospital who said that the immunity which Sinovac provided reduced over time.<sup>37</sup> In early July, a leaked health ministry document concurred questioning the efficacy of Sinovac.<sup>38</sup>

In mid-July 2021, in the face of surging cases, Thailand decided to go against the WHO warning not to “mix and match” by deciding that the booster shot to Sinovac (inactivated virus) would be a viral vector vaccine such as AstraZeneca. By late July, the US stepped in with a donation of 1.5 million Pfizer vaccines. In early September 2021, Thailand cited positive results from the Sinovac-AstraZeneca combination. While Thailand has officially not announced a shift from Sinovac, reports say that Thailand will receive 61 million shots of AstraZeneca this year, in 2021.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Bangkok Post*, “Sinovac produced anti-bodies halve every 40 days”, July 13, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2147667/sinovac-produced-antibodies-halve-every-40-days> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> *The Bangkok Post*, “Halt China virus shots, says expert,” July 23, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2153167/halt-china-virus-shots-says-expert> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> *Reuters*, “Leaked memo raises Thai concern about Sinovac vaccine's efficacy,” July 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/leaked-memo-raises-thai-concern-about-sinovac-vaccines-efficacy-2021-07-05/> (date of access September 1, 2021).

## **China’s “vaccination diplomacy” — Malaysia**

Malaysia, a nation of 32 million administered Sinovac vaccines in the national immunization program approved by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA) in March 2021.<sup>39</sup> By May 2021, the number of cases in Malaysia breached the 7,000 cases mark. In June-July, cases surged to more than 14,000 cases. At the end of August 2021, more than 47 percent of the population was vaccinated but cases touched 22,000. By 1 September, 2021, ICUs were operating at 90 percent capacity. The states of Sabah, Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Johor were worst affected.<sup>40</sup>

Malaysia has experienced a surge in cases in the Klang Valley, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (known for its factories). A number of factors such as the slow and low vaccination, political instability, ambiguity about COVID-19 protocol and differing strategies employed by the member states led to a spike in cases.

By July 2021, Malaysia had secured 16 million Sinovac doses. Indonesia and Thailand both of which used Sinovac, struggled to contain the epidemic. In mid-July 2021, Malaysia announced that it would stop using Sinovac. Malaysia did not offer a reason.

Malaysia announced that it was making a switch to Pfizer, of which it had secured 45.7 million doses. Health Director General Noor Hisham was quoted as saying that given the surfeit of vaccines, Malaysia would employ Pfizer as the main vaccine and that those who had not yet been vaccinated would receive the Pfizer jab.<sup>41</sup>

## **China’s “vaccination diplomacy” — Philippines**

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<sup>39</sup> *Xinhua*, “Malaysia lauds WHO approval of China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine”, June 2, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-06/02/c\\_139985048.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-06/02/c_139985048.htm) date of (access September 1, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> *Channel News Asia*, “Malaysia reports 20,988 new COVID-19 cases; ICUs at 90% capacity”, September 2, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-new-covid-19-cases-icus-near-capacity-sep-2-2152141> (date of access September 1, 2021).

<sup>41</sup> *Radio Free Asia*, “Malaysia to Stop Using Sinovac Vaccine, Will Switch to Pfizer”, July 15, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/malaysia-sinovac-07152021160833.html> (date of access September 1, 2021).

Philippines, Southeast Asia's second most populous country with a population of 109 million received the first shipment of 600,000 jabs of China-donated vaccines, Sinovac on 28 February, 2021. As of 2 September, 2021, 13.5 percent of the population is vaccinated.<sup>42</sup> Daily case rates hit 22,000 end of August 2021, the resurgence driven by the delta variant. Manila and nearby provinces entered lockdown.

Philippines received donations from China as Philippines is of strategic importance to China. Philippines is the frontline state in the South China Sea conflict. Philippines took China to the International Court of Justice (Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague in 2016) over claims in the South China Sea. The tribunal ruled in favour of Philippines. In the following years, Philippines sought to leverage the ruling to its advantage by seeking Chinese investment for infrastructure. In 2016, during President Duterte's visit to China, Duterte announced that it was "time to say goodbye to Washington."

But "goodbye to Washington" is easier said than done. Philippines is a critical partner for the US, both are signatories to the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty. Philippines is also a signatory to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) (renewed in 2021) which enables free entry to US military aircraft and vessels.

In 2021, Philippines patience with the US ran low as the US was late in the "vaccine diplomacy" game. The US donated 3.2 million Johnson & Johnson vaccines only in July 2021; 3 million Moderna vaccines in August 2021 and 188,370 doses of Pfizer in September 2021,<sup>43</sup> all this much later than China.

During the intervening months, Philippines had to bank on Chinese vaccines. Philippines had fallen behind in the race for securing vaccines because the government refused to sign non-disclosure agreements with pharmaceutical companies, avoided protecting pharmaceutical

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<sup>42</sup> *Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, Coronavirus Resources Center*, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/philippines> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, "U.S. government provides additional 188,370 Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines to Philippines", September 3, 2021," <https://ph.usembassy.gov/u-s-provides-additional-188370-pfizer-biontech-vaccines-to-the-philippines/> (date of access September 3, 2021).

companies from liabilities and there were existing Philippine laws in place to prevent government from pre-payment.<sup>44</sup>

Philippines received additional batches of Sinovac both mid-July and end July. But by May 2021, it was evident that Filipinos preferred Pfizer and AstraZeneca over Sinovac. The South China Morning Post, Hong Kong carried a cryptic headline capturing the sentiment “Most Filipinos don’t want a coronavirus vaccine. Especially not a Chinese one”.<sup>45</sup> Earlier in May 2021, Filipinos lined up at the Manila Prince Hotel, Manila as early as 2.00 am as news spread that Pfizer not Sinovac was to be administered. The clear preference for Pfizer not Sinovac compelled the health authorities to announce that local governments would no longer be allowed to announce which vaccine (Sinovac or Pfizer) was available at the vaccination centre.<sup>46</sup>

As donations from the US began trickling in, Philippines had a change of heart. Philippines renewed the VFA agreement with the US. Philippines is also undertaking studies for a “mix and match” formula and need for a COVID-19 booster dose. Philippines may follow the Thailand/ Indonesia “mix and match” formula.

### **China’s “vaccination diplomacy” — Vietnam**

Vietnam, population of 97 million was deemed a success story which managed to contain COVID-19 despite low vaccination. As countries shut down in Southeast Asia. businesses and

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<sup>44</sup> Neo Chai Chin and Jonathan Chia, *Channel News Asia*, “After struggles to secure COVID-19 vaccines, Indonesia and Philippines look to get jabs back on track”, August 17, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/after-struggles-secure-covid-19-vaccines-indonesia-and-philippines-look-get-jabs-back-track-2109101> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Alan Robles, “Most Filipinos don’t want a coronavirus vaccine. Especially not a Chinese one”, *The South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3134950/most-filipinos-dont-want-coronavirus-vaccine> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Ashley Westerman, Do People Need to Know Which COVID-19 Vaccine They're Getting? One Country Says No, *NPR*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2021/05/19/998139555/do-people-need-to-know-which-covid-19-vaccine-theyre-getting-one-country-says-no> (date of access September 2, 2021).

factories in Vietnam remained open. Vietnam's GDP expanded by 2.9 percent.<sup>47</sup> With successful control, low cases and deaths, Vietnam did not pursue vaccine development actively.

But in May 2021, there was a surge in cases, driven by the delta variant. Since, cases have spiked. As of September 2, 2021, only 2.83 percent of the population is vaccinated and the caseloads on the increase.

Vietnam-China relations are amicable but anti-Chinese sentiment is prevalent because of the South China Sea conflict and historical reasons. China reached out to Vietnam via “vaccine diplomacy”. Vietnam approved China's Sinopharm on June 4, 2021. On June 20, 2021 China donated 500,000 doses of Sinopharm. However, China's vaccines came with the conditionality that Chinese nationals in Vietnam be vaccinated first, followed by the Vietnamese who work in China and people living in border areas (with China).<sup>48</sup> In fact, the Chinese Embassy expressed concerns with the Vietnamese distribution plans saying it had “broken its promise to give priority to Chinese nationals”. This led to a backlash in Vietnam as China's “vaccine diplomacy” was perceived as self-serving.

On July 7, 2021, Vietnam received 97,000 doses of Pfizer from the US. Vietnam has ordered 31 million doses in total. Vietnam is also seeking to diversify its own vaccine production with four indigenous vaccines: Nanogen, Vabiotech, Polyvac, and the Institute of Vaccines and Medical Biologicals (IVAC). Vietnam signals a pro-Western vaccine bent.

### **China's “vaccine diplomacy” examined**

Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam —benefit from economic ties with China but all of them, in varying degrees, harbour latent anti-Chinese

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<sup>47</sup> Grady McGregor, “Vietnam had a near-perfect record of fending off COVID-19. Then came the Delta variant”, August 24, 2021, Fortune, <https://fortune.com/2021/08/24/vietnam-covid-delta-outbreak-pfizer-astrazeneca-sputnik-sinopharm> (date of access September 2, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Lu Xin, “Vietnam agrees to fulfil promise to first inoculate Chinese with China-donated vaccines”, *Global Times*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1227114.shtml> (date of access September 2, 2021).



sentiment and Sinophobia. These countries have witnessed debate on social media and in the press on the efficacy of Chinese vaccines.

Of all Southeast Asian countries, Singapore has chosen the neutral path. It has not accepted Sinovac into the national immunization programme but it has not outright rejected it either. Singapore has allowed Sinovac usage by private health providers.

But based on the readings and available empirical literature<sup>49</sup> a majority of the Southeast Asian countries exhibit a clear preference and tilt toward Western vaccines. There has also been debate on the intent of China's "vaccine diplomacy" — in countries like Taiwan and Myanmar.

In fact, China's "vaccine diplomacy" in Taiwan and Myanmar has inadvertently illustrated the rough edges of China's "vaccine diplomacy". In Myanmar, China's donation of masks was tied to the conditionality that it be used in Mandalay and Yangon, the two key cities through which China's economic corridor (which ends in Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Rakhine state) runs through.<sup>50</sup>

In Myanmar, China has provided vaccine in the bordering areas of the Wa region of the Shan state and the Kachin state troubled by insurgency and armed conflict, as escalation of the conflict has implications on China's bordering areas.<sup>51</sup> Jason Tower notes that China's state owned companies and the private sector with economic interests in Myanmar have rallied with support.<sup>52</sup> This is similar to China's "vaccine diplomacy" in Vietnam where China's donation

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<sup>49</sup> See Khairulanwar Zaini, *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Nan Lwin, "In Myanmar, Concerns That China's Help on COVID-19 Comes With Strings Attached", April 24, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/myanmar-concerns-chinas-help-covid-19-comes-strings-attached.html> (date of access September 5, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> *VOA News*, Junta Faces Difficulties on Myanmar Vaccination Program, August 20, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/junta-faces-difficulties-myanmar-vaccination-program> (date of access, September 4, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Jason Tower, *United States Institute of Peace*, May 27, 2020, China Using Pandemic Aid to Push Myanmar Economic Corridor, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/china-using-pandemic-aid-push-myanmar-economic-corridor> (date of access September 4, 2021).

was tied to the conditionality that it be used for Chinese citizens first. These instances have raised questions about the transactional nature of China's diplomacy, and explains US defence secretary Lloyd Austin's Fullerton speech in Singapore (discussed earlier).

During the pandemic, Taiwan-China relations have worsened. Taiwan claims that China prevented access to vaccines. This problem arose because Shanghai based Fosun Pharma had secured exclusive distribution rights for Greater China Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.<sup>53</sup> Acceptance by Taiwan would imply China's sovereignty over Taiwan. To circumvent this, vaccines were routed through the philanthropic efforts of Foxconn and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC).

Laos and Cambodia are at the opposite end of China's vaccination diplomacy. Both have wholeheartedly supported China's help without questioning China's strategic intention.<sup>54</sup> As Chheang Vannarith argues "In terms of strategic trust and partnership, from the Chinese perspective, Cambodia and Lao PDR are in the first tier....".

## Conclusion

China's "vaccine diplomacy" prioritised Southeast Asia but has had uneven success. The primary reason is question over efficacy. The efficacy of Chinese vaccine is low compared to Western vaccines. Efficacy rates are 50.4 percent for Sinovac, 79 percent for Sinopharm, 66 percent for CanSino. In comparison, the efficacy for Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna stands at 95 percent, Novovax at 89 percent and AstraZeneca at 62-90 percent.<sup>55</sup> The efficacy question (science not Sinophobia) has fuelled further distrust.

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<sup>53</sup> *TRT World*, Tech giants buy Covid vaccines for Taiwan and bypass China wrangling, July 12, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/daily-news-brief/tech-giants-buy-covid-vaccines-for-taiwan-and-bypass-china-wrangling-4828> ( date of access September 4, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Chheang Vannarith, "Fighting COVID-19: China's Soft Power Opportunities in Mainland Southeast Asia", *Perspective*, Issue 2021, No.66, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, May 10, 2021, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_66.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_66.pdf) (date of access September 4, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Ardhiya Eduard Yeremia and Klaus Heinrich Raditio, *Ibid*.

The efficacy of the vaccine has been questioned by experts both in China and overseas. The Director of the Chinese Centre of Disease Control (China CDC), immunologist Gao Fu (George Cao) was reported as saying that Chinese vaccines had a low protection rate. (Later, China's media claimed that it had been a misunderstanding).

Though China's Foreign Ministry has said that it does not see a link between outbreak and vaccine, a CNBC report said that of the six countries where elevated COVID cases remain, five of them rely on vaccines from China.<sup>56</sup> Kenneth Mak, Director of Medical Services has questioned Sinovac saying "It's not a problem associated with Pfizer. This is actually a problem associated with the Sinovac vaccine".<sup>57</sup>

The absence of data and scarce published data on clinical trials of China made vaccines has been a stumbling block. Though Sinopharm and Sinovac were among the earliest to start clinical trials, data has not been published.<sup>58</sup> Trials have shown different efficacy rates, from 50.4 percent in Brazil to over 80 percent in Turkey.<sup>59</sup> The data has been questioned for being tested on smaller data-sets compared to real-world infections<sup>60</sup>. Again, experts say that the trials were conducted when the disease was not at its peak and that trials were not conducted on population with core morbidities. Data is yet to be peer reviewed. The price point has also been an issue. Indonesia received Sinovac at US\$13.60, marginally below Pfizer and Moderna which cost US\$15-20 / \$15-18 per shot.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Yen Nee Lee, "Six vaccinated countries have high Covid infection rates. Five of them rely on Chinese vaccines", *CNBC*, 7 July 2021 <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/08/five-vaccinated-countries-with-high-covid-rates-rely-on-china-vaccines.html> (date of access September 5, 2021).

<sup>57</sup> Sui-Wei Lee, "They relied on Chinese vaccines. Now They're battling Outbreaks", *New York Times*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/business/economy/china-vaccines-covid-outbreak.html> (date of access September 5, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Eva Dou and Shibani Mahtani, "China's vaccine diplomacy stumbles as clinical trial data remains absent", *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-coronavirus-singapore-data/2021/03/23/7a0582ca-8afc-11eb-a33e-da28941cb9ac\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-coronavirus-singapore-data/2021/03/23/7a0582ca-8afc-11eb-a33e-da28941cb9ac_story.html) (date of access September 4, 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Smriti Mallapaty, "China COVID vaccine reports mixed results — what does that mean for the pandemic?", January 15, 2021, *Nature*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00094-z> (date of access September 4, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Tessa Wong, *Ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> Khairulanwar Zaini, *Ibid*.

The question of technological advancement is also a big one. In general, the perception is that the West has made a technological breakthrough using a new technology mRNA whereas China fell back on the traditional, old and tested way of using the inactivated virus. The West may have proved its technological prowess and shown that there is a technological gap between China and the West.

China's "vaccine diplomacy" has been a welcome initiative but undercut by the efficacy of its own vaccines. China's hard diplomacy has not helped. Despite the rhetoric of "loveable" China, China continues to show its teeth in the South China Sea, negotiations with India and dealings with the international media. Noted expert Manoranjan Mohanty has questioned whether China's "soft" power initiative "loveable" can be strategized, arguing instead that an organic interpretation of "global public good" will further China's diplomacy. In a similar interpretation, former foreign minister of Singapore, George Yeo has noted that the "The key to [China] winning the argument is not by words, but deeds". The G-7 pledge to donate 1 billion doses may displace China in "vaccine diplomacy". China will face competition from India gearing up to start exports in 2022. A "loveable" China is the need of the day. But China translating rhetoric into reality has hit roadblocks, of its own making. Moving forward, these are none that China cannot address.

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