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Was Vietnam's Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine Debacle Just a Stunt?

There is a strong case to be made that the Vietnamese government leveraged ingrained anti-Chinese sentiment to boost vaccine uptake.

By Le Dong Hai Nguyen

There's hardly any populace on Earth that is more anti-China than the Vietnamese. Several millennia of wars and border skirmishes, from a thousand years under Chinese rule to today's disputes over the South China Sea, have ensured in Vietnam a deep distrust of its ideologically and culturally proximate neighbor.

This mistrust burst into the open recently when Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city, became the beneficiary of a corporate "donation" of five million doses of Vero Cell vaccines produced by China National Pharmaceutical Group Corporation (Sinopharm).

On July 31, Vietnam's Ministry of Health announced that 1 million of the donated Chinese doses would soon enter the vaccine portfolio of Ho Chi Minh City, where a spike of COVID-19 infections has sent the city back into lockdown and prompted the near-collapse of its medical facilities. Google searches for topics such as "penalty for refusing vaccination" and "is it okay to not vaccinate" surged among the city residents. This is in direct contrast with a study published in February this year in *The Lancet*, which attributes Vietnam with the highest vaccine acceptance rate in the world.

Such a backlash against the Chinese vaccine is not unexpected, given that Vietnamese usually perceive products from the People's Republic of China to be of low quality. After days of public outcry, the government backed off the plan to use the Sinopharm vaccine. Some critics have welcomed the move as an indication that Hanoi has begun to listen to public opinion. And they might be right. With an ongoing COVID-19 resurgence that has obliterated its perfect track record in handling the virus last year, the Vietnamese government simply cannot risk further eroding its reputation.

But what if the critics were wrong? Might this whole vaccine debacle be just a clever publicity stunt to boost Vietnam's sluggish – or "too slow," in the words of the health minister – vaccine rollout? It may seem contradictory, but once we take a deeper look at the backbone of Vietnam's vaccination program, it makes a certain amount of sense.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine currently accounts for 60 percent of the country's total available doses at the time of writing. Despite being a "Western"-made vaccine and thereby seen more favorably than its Chinese counterpart, this vaccine has been the target of significant mistrust and hesitancy among Vietnam's young population. So far, five people have died in Vietnam as a result of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The fact that many European countries have restricted the vaccine to older people out of concern for blood clots among young people obviously does not help.

Many Vietnamese are thus willing to wait for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and being inoculated with one of these two vaccines is seen as a privilege. Last July, the Vietnamese online

community was angered when a young woman obtained the Pfizer vaccine instead of the AstraZeneca one thanks to her grandfather's political connections.

Hesitancy for the AstraZeneca vaccine, however, could seriously derail Vietnam's already sluggish vaccination campaign. Just as standing next to a less attractive friend makes you look better, Vietnam's strategy to briefly include the Chinese vaccines in its vaccine pool might just make the AstraZeneca vaccine look marginally more appealing.

Recent data seems to support this. In the days leading up to August 3, after which the Sinopharm vaccine was supposed to be included within the city's vaccine portfolio, Ho Chi Minh City repeatedly set a daily vaccination record. Social media posts expressing hesitancy for the AstraZeneca vaccine also seemed to plummet as the attention turned to the Chinese vaccine.

Haiphong, a northern port city with large trading activity with China, requested to "borrow" half a million Sinopharm doses from Ho Chi Minh City shortly after the latter's plan to use Chinese vaccines was abandoned. Vietnam's biggest city has also planned to share the remaining doses with other provinces, presumably ones in the north bordering China.

This seems to be in line with the previous vaccine distribution plan that the health minister announced in June, when China donated half a million Sinopharm doses to Vietnam as part of its vaccine diplomacy scheme. According to the plan, Hanoi would restrict the use of these vaccines to Chinese nationals living in the country, as well as Vietnamese wishing to travel to China or those living near the Chinese border. At a time when its public approval is at an all-time low due to the ongoing COVID-19 resurgence, it's unlikely that the regime is serious about suddenly changing its optics and further angering its citizens.

So, it's quite likely that the Sinopharm vaccine is just a foil for the often-underestimated AstraZeneca vaccine – an elaborate plan to boost vaccine rollout in Vietnam's largest city and COVID-19 epicenter. Even if the Chinese vaccines might be included in the city's future vaccination programs, Vietnam has achieved an important goal: nobody seems to make a fuss about blood clots anymore.

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