

Vietnam begins Covid-19 vaccination drive without China-made shots

- Vietnam, the only Asean nation that has yet to publicly state if it will use the Sinovac or Sinopharm vaccines, begins inoculations on Monday
- Analysts say anti-China sentiment among the public and diplomatic tensions are two factors behind the spurning of the vaccines

Sen Nguyen

Hanoi resident Hoang Cam Hang, 25, is looking forward to her Covid-19 vaccination. Vietnam, which has among the lowest total reported coronavirus infections in Southeast Asia, will launch its immunisation drive on Monday with over 117,000 doses of the vaccine developed by British-Swedish pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca.

The programme will initially be conducted in 18 hospitals treating coronavirus patients, and in areas with higher infection numbers, Vietnam's health minister Nguyen Thanh Long said on Friday.

But while Hang – who has a background in health care and works for a health care non-profit group – said she would confidently take any vaccine approved by Vietnamese regulators, one made in China would be her last resort.

“Besides what's available in the public health care system, the next option for me would be the vaccine from Russia, then the US, then the one from China if there is no other choice,” she said, adding that her decision was based on their reported efficacy rates.

The AstraZeneca vaccine has an average efficacy rate of 70 per cent, according to various trials, while Russia's Sputnik V vaccine provides around 92 per cent protection, according to late-stage trial results published in medical journal *The Lancet*. In Israel, the first real-world test of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine that Vietnam has also approved for emergency use found that it was 94 per cent effective.

In comparison, China's Sinopharm has said the vaccine made by its Wuhan subsidiary has a 72.5 per cent efficacy rate. Beijing-based Sinovac's vaccine was found to be 50.6 per cent effective in a trial involving health care workers in Brazil, but over 91 per cent effective in a much smaller trial conducted in Turkey. The World Health Organization's threshold for Covid-19 vaccine effectiveness is 50 per cent, though each country has their own cut-off.

Hang's stance reflects Vietnam's move to steer clear of Chinese vaccines, despite Beijing's pledge to make vaccines a global public good and offer priority access to developing countries – it is the only country among the 10-member Asean bloc that has yet to publicly state if it will use Chinese-made vaccines.

Indonesia in January launched a mass vaccination programme with Sinovac vaccines and has administered nearly 3.2 million doses as of Wednesday, while it is recruiting 4,000 volunteers to participate in a late-stage clinical trial for the Covid-19 vaccine manufactured by China's Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical.

Malaysia has approved the use of Sinovac vaccines, while Singapore has taken delivery of a shipment but has not approved them for use. Brunei has received a donation of Sinopharm vaccines, while Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and the Philippines have begun using either Sinopharm or Sinovac vaccines. Myanmar was promised a Chinese vaccine by Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his visit to Myanmar in January, although no deliveries have been made.

Nguyen Phuong Linh, associate director with global consultancy firm Control Risks, said China's vaccine diplomacy had failed with Vietnam mainly because of anti-China sentiments among the public.

Vietnamese leaders, who had been enjoying strong support for successfully managing Covid-19 – the country of 98 million has recorded over 2,500 Covid-19 infections and 35 related deaths – would not want to risk losing such favour, Linh said. “From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus has been widely reported in Vietnam as originally coming from China. Since then, the anti-China sentiments, which were already strong, have shown no sign of weakening.”

Huong Le Thu, a senior analyst and Southeast Asia project lead at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a think tank co-funded by the US and Australian governments, said Hanoi had assessed the vaccines based on factors including efficacy rates, medical credibility and affordability.

A high level of trust in the vaccines was needed in order for populations to agree to be vaccinated, she said. Le Thu added that in the early days of the pandemic, China did not come to Vietnam with offers of personal protective equipment as it had to other Southeast Asian neighbours, which showed a level of politicisation in Beijing's “Covid-19 diplomacy” – and which Hanoi had taken into consideration.

Former communist allies Vietnam and China have always had an uneasy diplomatic relationship, with the Vietnamese retaining simmering antipathy towards the Chinese that stems from a centuries-long Chinese occupation that ended in the year 939, and the 1979 border war between the countries that Beijing started in response to Hanoi invading Cambodia a year earlier.

These sentiments have been fuelled by an ongoing territorial dispute in the South China Sea between China, Vietnam and three other Asean countries, and Beijing's activities on the Mekong River that have affected Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) downstream, including Vietnam.

While Hanoi has been careful to manage its ties with Beijing, given that China is Vietnam's largest trading partner and second-biggest export market after the United States, bilateral tensions have resurfaced in recent months. For example, diplomatic observers said it was telling that China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited nine Asean states over a period of a few months before the inauguration of Joe Biden as the new US President in January – except for Vietnam.

Besides using the AstraZeneca vaccine and approving the Pfizer-BioNTech and Sputnik V vaccines for emergency use, Vietnam is also developing four home-grown vaccines, with human trials having started for two of them. One of these, the Nano Covax vaccine by Ho Chi Minh City-based Nanogen Pharmaceutical Biotechnology, is in its second phase of human trials and is expected to be approved for emergency use by the middle of the year.

Vietnam – which has secured 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the Covax Facility, the World Health Organization initiative looking to ensure equitable access to vaccines – aims to inoculate 80 per cent of its population or about 72 million people to achieve herd immunity.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Singapore – which has a population of about 5.7 million people – might achieve widespread vaccination coverage by the end of this year, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to do so. The EIU estimates that Vietnam could take six months longer, while Thailand, Malaysia and China might take until the end of next year; Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and the Philippines might only have inoculated most of their citizens in early 2023.

Vu Minh Hoang, a visiting faculty member in diplomatic history and Vietnamese studies at Fulbright University Vietnam, said there was “no concrete evidence that the Vietnamese leadership consciously avoided Sinovac due to concerns about public distrust of China”.

In fact, he said, it was unclear to him if the Sinovac vaccine had even been made available to Vietnam or whether Hanoi had considered it.

He said even if Vietnam could achieve mass vaccination on its own, without using any of the China-made vaccines, it would still be in the collective interest for China to offer doses to its neighbours.

“At the end of the day, a shot given anywhere in the world helps reduce contagion for everyone,” Hoang said.

“We are all in this together, and nationalist competition for vaccinations is unhelpful.”