



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **Thailand: A Battleground for Vaccine Diplomacy**

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Amid public outcry about insufficient supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, Thailand is miraculously beginning to meet demand through vaccine donations from Japan, the US and China—which was the first country to donate vaccines to Thailand.

By default, through the largesse of these three powers, Thailand has become the new battleground for vaccine diplomacy. Unlike other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Thailand does not have any brand preference for vaccines. Although the use of medical supplies and cooperation as a diplomatic instrument is not new, the urgency and strategic competition has transformed vaccines into one of the most effective foreign policy tools.

As Thailand is struggling to contain the coronavirus which has surged since the Songkran new year holidays in mid-April in the virulent new Delta variant, the Prayut government

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is simultaneously facing a two-pronged challenge—additional new clusters and a huge demand for vaccination. These dilemmas have external dimensions that can be easily discerned.

Since the end of June, after close monitoring of new clusters, nearly 600 construction sites in red zones, mainly in Bangkok and adjacent areas, were ordered to shut down to avoid further contamination in clean zones. These sites house over 80,000 workers from the provinces and neighboring countries. The government should have done what it did earlier when new clusters were found in early December in Samut Sakhon, where numerous workers in the fishing industry became infected. At the time, the government was concerned that a widened and sustained lockdown in key industrial areas would dampen economic activity.

The worsening situation inside Myanmar has driven its people to cross into Thailand to avoid conflict, infection and gain some sort of job security. According to statistics from the National Security Council, from June 2020 to May 2021 more than 34,000 persons entered Thailand illegally through the porous 2,401-km Thai-Myanmar border. Several thousand more went uncounted as they sneaked into the country with the assistance of local human-smuggling rings. Now only 11 of 21 border checkpoints are open but the border trade continues normally.

With the bubble-sealed sites, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha is hoping that within 30 days, the uptick will come down. Over the past three days new infections were averaging well over 6,000 per day, which gave goosebumps to government leaders and health officials. However, they are determined to move on with the “Phuket Sandbox” model, which would be applied to other tourist spots Koh Samui or Pattaya. Prayut reiterated that the risk is worth taking by reopening the country.

Regarding the high demand for vaccination and earlier mismanagement of vaccine roll-out, the massive inoculation campaign has been thrown into a big mess. Locally made AstraZeneca

vaccines, despite the government's repeated guarantee, are insufficient. Henceforth, Thailand has earnestly looked for foreign sources for supplies. The Chinese-made vaccines, Sinovac, was the first choice due to the less complicated procedure to import the vaccine while the Western branches such as Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson are harder to access due to huge demands from around the world. This has led to severe criticism of authorities responsible for the COVID-19 prevent plan for their failure to diversify the sources of shots. On July 6, the Thai Cabinet approved the purchase of 20 million Pfizer for deliveries later in the years. Additional order for other brands also forthcoming.

Fortunately, Washington has made the timely move. Minister of Public Health, Anutin Charnvirakul revealed that the US has already donated 1.5 million of doses from Pfizer to Thailand. This amount was negotiated bilaterally with the US as it is not a member of COVAX, which is administered by WHO to provide vaccines to developing countries.

At this juncture, both China and the US donated the same number of doses to Thailand at 1.5 million shots. Thailand has already purchased 10.5 million doses—the biggest in ASEAN and the first member to do so. At Chongqing in early June during the bilateral meeting, China pledged to donate more vaccines to Thailand, if need be. Foreign Minister Wang Yi said recently that China would donate 100 million doses of vaccine to Southeast Asia. However, it must be reiterated here that Bangkok prefers to import commercially Chinese vaccines.

Interestingly, meanwhile Japan also has also provided 1.05 million doses of Astra Zeneca, which Tokyo produced, to Thailand early this month. Tokyo's giveaway was seen as part of the Quad cooperation for the region and a counter-balancing move to China. After the Quad summit in mid-March, its leaders agreed to set up Quad Vaccine Partnership. The combined vaccine

donation from the US and Japan are bigger than China—thus, making Thailand the battleground nation.

Under the Biden administration, a total of 7 million out of 25 million doses will be shared among 16 Asian countries. The first batch of Pfizer vaccines will be available for jabs for Thais in the coming days. The Thai Food and Drug Administration has last month approved Pfizer vaccines, the sixth brand, for emergency use. Due to the public belief that Pfizer vaccine is better, who would be the first group to receive the shot would be closely scrutinized. Last week, the health authorities decided that the senior citizens and frontline workers would get the Pfizer jabs. Literally, the decision halted all speculations that only high-status persons, politicians and some “hotshots” would get the shots.

When the Pfizer vaccine was first brought into Thailand to exclusively inoculate the US embassy’s staff in late April, it was morphed into a political battle between the government and opposition parties. Worse, at the same time, anti-government groups spun numerous conspiracies and tales of corruption and preferential treatment in the upper echelons. These fake news have forced the government to rethink its distribution strategies this time around.

These days vaccine diplomacy has morphed into an encompassing manoeuvre that overcomes all diplomatic obstacles. The Biden administration donates vaccines without any pre-condition. In other instances, Washington always provides foreign assistance as part of a carrot-and-stick policy. This could mark a new departure from the normal US policy and practice. After all, these are abnormal times. Even though the US government Biden has reiterated that it would be guided by liberal norms and democratic values and approaches in pursuing ties with foreign countries. In reality, it is not fully implemented.

Take for an example the current state of the US and Russia relations. Their ties have improved since the recent Geneva talks between the two presidents even without any improvement to the human rights situation inside Russia. Ahead of their first bilateral meeting, Washington demanded that Moscow release Russian dissident Alexai Navalny. Nothing happened. Instead, the two leaders discussed what they could do together. Fighting terrorism, COVID-19, climate change and cybercrime are on their common agenda.

If this pathway spreads to other less powerful countries, it will signal the US emphasis on common interests on which they can cooperate rather than dwelling on differences that irritate them. It remains to be seen what the US would do to engage the developing countries with questionable human rights and democratic values when the Biden Administration organises and designs its first global forum on democracy later on.

All things considered, Thailand is situated at the crossroads of the competition between the world's key players, trying simultaneously to sustain and expand their footholds. For the time being, Bangkok's engagement with vaccine diplomacy practiced by the great powers will reveal the likely trajectory and how these powers will be perceived in the region.