

## International

# China 'vaccine diplomacy': A global charm offensive

## Wealthy countries scramble to buy up the limited supply

**BEIJING:** As wealthy countries scramble to buy up the limited supply of big-name coronavirus vaccines, China is stepping in to offer its homegrown jabs to poorer countries. But the largesse is not entirely altruistic, with Beijing hoping for a long-term diplomatic return. The strategy carries multiple possible benefits: deflecting anger and criticism over China's early handling of the pandemic, raising the profile of its biotech firms, and both strengthening and extending influence in Asia and beyond. "There is no doubt China is practicing vaccine diplomacy in an effort to repair its tarnished image," Huang Yanzhong, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), told AFP. "It has also become a tool to increase China's global influence and iron out... geopolitical issues." Stung by criticism of its handling of the emergence of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China has made much of its own ability to get its own outbreak under control, with state media carrying pictures of life-as-normal at pool parties and sporting events.

In the early months of the pandemic, Beijing hurried to export millions of masks and gowns, and sent medical teams to help strained healthcare systems in Europe and Africa. Now, with major Western pharmaceutical companies beginning to bring their vaccines to market, China is rolling out its own versions - signing agreements to supply millions of doses, including to countries that have a sometimes-prickly relationship with Beijing.

### Seizing the mantle

Chinese diplomats have inked deals with Malaysia and the Philippines, both of which have previously complained about Beijing's expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. In August, Premier Li Keqiang promised priority vaccine access to countries along the Mekong river, where a devastating drought has been worsened by Chinese dams built upstream. "China's 'vaccine diplomacy' is not unconditional," Ardhitya Eduard Yerima and Klaus Heinrich Raditio said in a paper published this month by the Singapore-based Yusof Ishak institute. "Beijing may use its vaccine donations to advance its regional agenda, particularly on sensitive issues such as its claims in the South China Sea," they added. The move by President Xi Jinping to offer up a Chinese vaccine worldwide as a "public good" also allows Beijing to paint itself as a leader in global health, said the CFR's Huang, seizing a mantle left untended as the US retreated under Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine.

## Female Afghan activist, TV journalist shot dead

**JALALABAD:** A female Afghan news anchor and activist was shot dead by assailants yesterday, her employer said, the second journalist killed in a month in Afghanistan. Malalai Maiwand, in her 20s, was killed along with her driver Mohammad Tahir in the eastern city of Jalalabad as they travelled to work, said Enekaas TV, the private television channel she worked for.

The journalist, whose activist mother was also killed by unknown gunmen five years ago, had previously spoken out about the difficulties of being a female reporter under Afghanistan's ultra-conservative patriarchal system. Maiwand's death comes as targeted killings of prominent figures becomes increasingly common as violence surges, despite ongoing peace talks between the government and the Taliban.

No group has claimed the attack. Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman for the Nangarhar provincial governor, and the local hospital both confirmed the deaths. "Who has problems with women working in the Afghan society?" deputy spokeswoman to the president Fatima Murchal tweeted. She added: "These coward culprits will not be forgiven,

Washington is notably absent from a global alliance of 189 countries that have pledged to distribute vaccines equitably. Beijing signed up in October as its drugmakers launched final stage trials. But this program has only secured enough doses to cover 20 percent of the population of low- and middle-income countries by the end of next year - offering a commercial opportunity. China is ramping up production facilities to make one billion coronavirus shots next year - and, having largely tamed the outbreak at home, it will have a surplus to sell.

If China can capture just 15 percent of the market in middle and low-income countries, it would net around \$2.8 billion in sales, according to an estimate by Essence Securities, a Hong Kong-based brokerage firm. "Everyone is clamoring for a vaccine and Beijing is in a good position to tap gold at the bottom of the pyramid," said an analyst at the company, who declined to be named. The global inoculation drive also requires storage facilities and cold chains to transport the doses. Such projects dovetail nicely with Xi's \$1 trillion infrastructure push - the Belt and Road Initiative - which has otherwise taken a hit because of the pandemic, said Kirk Lancaster of the CFR. E-commerce giant Alibaba has already built warehouses in Ethiopia and Dubai that will serve as vaccine distribution hubs for Africa and the Middle East.—AFP



**LIMA:** A health worker prepares a syringe to inoculate a volunteer with a COVID-19 vaccine produced by the Chinese Sinopharm during its trial at the Clinical Studies Center of the Cayetano Heredia University in Lima. — AFP

not even after peace." Daily life for women has improved from a nadir under the Taliban, but the United Nations noted there were widespread levels of violence against women in the war-ravaged nation.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, a group that oversees journalists' security in the country, warned the continued violence was threatening to undo years of progress. "If the killing of journalists does not stop, Afghanistan will lose one of its greatest achievements which is press freedom," the committee tweeted and called for an investigation. Top US envoy in Kabul Ross Wilson condemned the "assassination" and called for the violence to stop. President Ashraf Ghani's spokesman Sediqqi Sediqqi also condemned Maiwand's murder. "The terrorist attack on Malalai Miwand is shocking and utterly despicable," Sediqqi tweeted. "The current senseless violence against our people must end". Nangarhar province and its capital Jalalabad have seen regular clashes between government forces and the Taliban. The extremist Islamic State group has also claimed several deadly attacks there.

The murder of Maiwand comes just weeks after Radio Liberty reporter Aliyas Dayee was killed in a car bomb attack in Lashkar Gah. Human Rights Watch said Dayee had previously been threatened by the Taliban. A former television presenter in Kabul, Yama Siawash, was killed in a similar car bomb attack near his home last month. No group has so far claimed those murders. Afghan forces are battling an increase in violence, much of it unleashed by the Taliban as they attempt to gain leverage in peace talks in Qatar, which opened in September.—AFP

## Pompeo urges US universities to scrutinize Chinese students

**ATLANTA:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday urged US universities to scrutinize China's assistance and students, warning that Beijing was set on stealing innovation. The outgoing top US diplomat, known for his hawkish views on China, made the speech on a visit to Georgia, a state with a growing Asian-American community and which next month holds two elections that will determine which party controls the Senate.

Pompeo said that the United States should welcome Chinese who "genuinely" want to study in the country but pointed to two cases of Chinese students who were charged with spying and other examples of Beijing harassing its students abroad. "If we don't educate ourselves, if we're not honest about what's taking place, we'll get schooled by Beijing," Pompeo said in a speech at Georgia Tech. "The Chinese Communist Party knows it can never match our innovation," Pompeo said. "That's why it sends 400,000 students a year to the United States of America."

He renewed calls for US universities to close all Confucius Institutes, the Beijing-funded institutions that offer Chinese-language instruction but are careful to toe to Beijing's line on politically sensitive topics. "We need administrators to close Confucius Institutes and investigate what so-called student groups backed by the CCP money are actually up to on their campuses," Pompeo said. "We cannot allow this tyrannical regime to steal our stuff, to build their military might, brainwash our people or buy off our institutions to help them cover up these activities."

In language sure to be welcomed by his Republican Party's right wing, Pompeo alleged that China has made inroads on left-leaning universities as they are "rife with anti-Americanism." He criticized several universities by name including the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, saying he had hoped to deliver his remarks there but was told by its president, Rafael Reif, that his comments "might insult their ethnic Chinese students and professors." MIT denied his account, saying it was contacted in August about being the venue for the speech by Pompeo and was "honored to be considered."

Reif told him that MIT was restricting gatherings to a maximum of 10 people to protect public health during the Covid-19 pandemic and conveyed his "deep regrets." "MIT turned down a number of other high-level guests for the same reasons," it said in a statement. Pompeo has described China as a central threat to the world and declared that President Donald Trump has turned the page on decades of US engagement with Beijing that have failed. President-elect Joe Biden has broadly agreed on the challenge from Beijing but has taken a less bellicose tone, with his aides seeing areas of cooperation such as fighting pandemics and climate change.—AFP