**Vaccine nationalism**

BY AY E S H A I J A Z K H A N 2021-03-29

WHEN it comes to vaccinating its population, the United States is in a secure position. With 14 per cent of the country fully vaccinated and 26pc having received a first dose, the US has the added advantage of being self-sufficient in vaccine production.

With arguably three of the best Covid-19 vaccines indigenously produced, America need not rely on others.

Across the Atlantic, things are not as rosy however. The United Kingdom started off well. In fact, the very first person to receive the Pfizer Covid-19 jab back in December was a 90-year-old UK grandmother.

Nevertheless, the UK decided to delay second doses to 12 weeks instead of the three to four week interval used by pharmaceutical companies in their vaccine trials. As a result, although half the UK population has received a first dose, only about 4pc are fully vaccinated.

More recently, supply issues have marred the vaccine rollout in the UK. Not only has the Serum Institute in India delayed its shipment of AstraZeneca to Britain, but more troublingly, vaccine rows with Europe are getting ugly. It all began in January of this year, when AstraZeneca fell behind on its schedule of deliveries to the European Union due to problems at a Belgian plant.

When the EU asked the Anglo-Swedish company to redirect doses made in the UK to make up for it, ironically its French CEO, Pascal Soriot, said that wasn`t possible because the supply coming out of the UK supply chain would go to the UK first. He implied that since the UK had signed the vaccine deal three months earlier than the EU, they had negotiated a better contract and had the first right to vaccines produced in the UK.

Since then anger has been brewing in European capitals, particularly as they watched the UK racing ahead, vaccinating its elderly, while the virus continued to surge and deaths continued to mount in Europe. This vaccine rivalry has festered to a point where Europe is threatening a ban on vaccine exports to the UK, or indeed any country that has vaccinated more of its population than Europe has. This could include countries like the UAE.

The trouble is that though vaccine nationalism seems to be taking us back to a bygone era of isolationist protectionism, supply chains in today`s world tend to be global. So even as Europe threatens to block vaccine exports to UK, the latter could well retaliate by blocking exports of raw materials.

The lipids used in the Pfizer vaccine, for example, are manufactured at a Yorkshire plant.

As Europe and the UK scramble for vaccine supplies, the US is sitting on excessdoses which it does not need. It has promised to send some to Canada and Mexico, but there are many more takers, the latest pleas coming from the Caribbean countries.

So while less fortunate countries are begging the US to share its doses, China is engaging in a more proactive form of vaccine diplomacy. In f act, a March 17 article in The Guardian titled, `Why home-produced Covid vaccine hasn`t helped India, Russia and China rollouts`, stated that in all three countries the indigenously produced vaccines were being used more as diplomacy tools than to vaccinate their own populations.

When it comes to AstraZeneca however the Indian government has also temporarily suspended exports and apparently intends to use the supply domestically in light of rising cases. India may swiftly earn a reputation for being an unreliable vaccine partner, but this decision also has serious consequences for the roll-out in countries like Pakistan, that are reliant on the Gavi/ WHO-backed Covax vaccine-sharingfacility.

Meanwhile, China, it has been reported in the Western press, has offered Paraguay vaccines in exchange for cutting off diplomatic relations with Taiwan. China has denied the allegation and Taiwan and the US have since stepped in tohelp Paraguay with its vaccine shortages.

But vaccines and politics are intersecting like neverbefore.Ithas also beenreported, for instance, that in a secret deal, Israel had paid Russia to send Sputnik jabs to Syria in exchange for a prisoner swap.

So where does all this leave Pakistan? Relying primarily on vaccine donations doesn`t seem to be a wise strategy. No contact seems to have been made at the governmental level to negotiate favourable deals with pharmaceuticals, as Israel did, for instance, and received the Pfizer vaccine for a fraction of cost in exchange for a datasharing arrangement.

A formidable Pakistan Day parade showing off military prowess seems out of touch when there is no local vaccine f actory that can rival India`s production capacity.

Scientists are saying this may not be the only pandemic we will have to face in our lifetimes. That alone should force a national rethink. The writer is a lawyer based in London.

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