



20TH SCO SUMMIT: STRENGTHENING COOPERATION IN FIGHTING COVID-19

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Member States was held on November 10, 2020. Due to the pandemic, the meeting was organized virtually and it was chaired by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The meeting was attended by leaders of China, Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also addressed the summit.¹

The topics of discussion included regional security, economic development and strengthening of cultural and humanitarian ties amongst the states. Not surprisingly, the fight against Covid-19 was the major talking point. Leaders of all the countries called for collaboration in controlling the spread of coronavirus and ensuring sustainable economic growth. To share the results of the 20th SCO Heads of State Council Meeting, the SCO Secretariat hosted a press conference by SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov on November 16, 2020. The Secretary-General apprised that the activities of existing cooperation mechanisms in the sphere of health care and sanitary-epidemiological well-being were intensified while a number of meetings, forums and consultations were held on the fight against COVID-19. On the adoption of the document titled 'Joint Response to the New Coronavirus

¹ SCO Secretariat. The Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States. Nov 10, 2020, <http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20201110/689235.html>

Infection', he said that it symbolises the factors of unity, cohesion and mutual support that the SCO member states provide to each other under the "Shanghai spirit".²

Highlighting the efforts made by Russia in fighting the pandemic, the Russian President said, "Russia has donated to its SCO partners about half a million Covid-19 lab diagnostic kits, as well as contactless temperature instruments. Teams of Russian medical specialists have been dispatched to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and nine such missions have already been completed."³ He also mentioned that coronavirus forced the SCO to adjust its agenda in order to accommodate a greater focus on healthcare, but cooperation in other areas did not slow down.

Chinese President, Xi Jinping stated that, "to fight the virus that respects no borders, we must take up the most powerful weapon of solidarity and cooperation, and rise up to the most imperative task of saving people's lives." He went on to say that, "we should strengthen our joint response to Covid-19, support each other's containment efforts, and uphold regional and global public health security. We should support the World Health Organization's crucial leadership role, oppose attempts to politicize the pandemic or mislabel the coronavirus, and jointly resist any political virus. We should put the SCO's health cooperation mechanisms into full use, and deepen exchanges and cooperation in epidemic monitoring, scientific research, and disease control and treatment." He also assured the SCO member states that his country will actively consider their need for vaccines.⁴

India is amongst the worst hit countries due to the coronavirus pandemic. More than 9 million people have been infected while the death toll has crossed 130,000.⁵ During his address, the Indian Prime Minister also pointed out his country's commitment towards fighting Covid-19. "In this very difficult time of the unprecedented epidemic, India's pharmaceutical industry has sent essential medicines to more than 150 countries. As the world's largest vaccine producing country, India will use its vaccine production and distribution capacity to help the entire humanity in fighting this crisis," he said.⁶ However, at a time when the second wave of Covid-19 is unleashing health and economic devastation across the region and regional cooperation is the need of the hour, Prime Minister Modi chose to confront China and Pakistan during other parts of his speech.

² SCO Secretariat.SCO Secretary-General's press conference on the results of the SCO Summit. November 16, 2020, <http://eng.sectosco.org/news/20201116/692924.html>

³ SCO Heads of State Council meeting, November 10, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/64385>

⁴ Xi Jinping's speech at 20th SCO summit, November 10, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-10/Full-text-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-at-20th-SCO-summit-VjmMg1pMSA/index.html>

⁵ Coronavirus, *Google News*, accessed on November 25, 2020, <https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-PK&gl=PK&ceid=PK%3Aen>

⁶ "PM Modi's stern message for China, Pakistan in SCO meet", *India Today*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-sco-summit-xi-jinping-live-updates-1739712-2020-11-10>

Making use of this crucial regional forum, Prime Minister Imran Khan suggested a number of measures for the SCO member states in order to control the spread of coronavirus. The suggestions included creating an SCO knowledge-bank of best practices to fight Covid-19 in order to guide us through the second wave and beyond, working out a strategy and an SCO Action Plan to mitigate the adverse economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the short, medium and long-term and taking a stand that the Covid-19 vaccine must be viewed as a “global public good”, affordable and accessible to all.⁷

The second wave of coronavirus has raised the threat of the pandemic. Countries that were showing signs of healthcare and economic recovery are headed back to lockdowns. Nonetheless, the recent progress in vaccine development has provided hope to humanity. After three major drug companies - AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna - reported major breakthroughs in vaccine development, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that, “there is now real hope that vaccines, in combination with other tried and tested public health measures, will help to end the pandemic.”⁸

Chinese vaccine developer, Sinovac, has also been successful in mid stage trials and its vaccine led to a quick immune response during trials with around 700 people.⁹ Late-stage trials of Chinese vaccines are being conducted in Saudi Arabia, Russia, Indonesia, Brazil and Pakistan.¹⁰ Pakistan’s National Institute of Health (NIH) has started conducting trials in partnership with Chinese companies. Major General Dr. Aamer Ikram, Executive Director of NIH, said that it is an honor for Pakistan to be among the few countries participating in the biggest and relatively difficult phase-3 study of a vaccine. He said the vaccine would be available in the market once its efficacy is proved and the results analyzed.¹¹

The developers of Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine have claimed that it is 92% effective. Their statement read, “as a result of a statistical analysis of 20 confirmed cases of coronavirus, the case split between vaccinated individuals and those who received the placebo indicates that the Sputnik

⁷ Remarks by the Prime Minister at the SCO Council of Heads of State Meeting, Islamabad, Prime Minister’s Office, November 10, 2020, https://pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=3647

⁸ “Now ‘real hope’ to end Covid-19 with vaccines: WHO chief”, *Xinhua*, November 24, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/24/c_139539304.htm

⁹ “Covid-19: Chinese vaccine ‘successful in mid-stage trials’”, *BBC*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54982910>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ “Pakistan Begins Phase 3 Trial of Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine”, *Voice of America*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/pakistan-begins-phase-3-trial-chinese-covid-19-vaccine>

V vaccine had an efficacy rate of 92% after the second dose.”¹² Sputnik V is considered to be the world’s first registered Covid-19 vaccine and President Putin stated during his address at the 12th BRICS summit that the Russian Direct Investment Fund has reached agreements with pharmaceutical companies in China and India to launch production of the vaccine in these countries not just to cover their needs, but for third countries as well.¹³

Despite the claims of vaccine manufacturers, Pakistan Prime Minister’s Taskforce on Science and Technology Chairman, Dr. Attaur Rahman, cautioned against the suitability of these vaccines. He has pointed out that Pakistan lacks cold chain to transport vaccine in required temperatures and there is no evidence regarding the duration of their effectiveness. “In the beginning, it is effective but you do not know for how many months the antibodies remain in your body,” he said.¹⁴

The vaccine might become available in the near future but countries need to ensure implementation of safety measures along with preparing apparatus for its distribution. Continued cooperation amongst states is required to overcome this global challenge. The words of the SCO leaders need to be matched by concrete measures in order to heal the region.

¹² “Russia’s Sputnik V Coronavirus Vaccine 92% Effective – Interim Data”, *The Moscow Times*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/11/russias-sputnik-v-coronavirus-vaccine-92-effective-interim-data-a72012>

¹³ “Sputnik V Vaccine Could Be Produced In India, China: Russian President”, *NDTV*, November 17, 2020 <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/sputnik-v-covid-19-vaccine-could-be-produced-in-india-china-russian-president-2326475>

¹⁴ “Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine not suitable for Pakistan: Dr Atta”, *Pakistan Today*, November 10, 2020 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/11/10/pfizer-covid-19-vaccine-not-suitable-for-pakistan-dr-atta/>