



2021-12(S)

The Perils of Openness? South Korea's Quarantine Exemption for Chinese Vaccines

LEE Dong Gyu

Associate Research Fellow
2021.07.14

On July 1, the South Korean government announced a policy for “Quarantine Exemption for Individuals Fully Vaccinated Overseas.” According to the policy, those who were fully vaccinated overseas can apply for quarantine exemption if entering South Korea for important business, academic/public interest, humanitarian reasons (including visiting immediate family members), and official government purposes. As such, relaxed entry and quarantine procedures for individuals who were vaccinated overseas is expected to increase the number of incoming travelers to South Korea. The South Korean government seems to have improved its status as a middle power by serving as a model for global health cooperation as some countries with high rates of COVID-19 vaccination begin to ease entry restrictions. However, the policy has raised some issues by setting the inoculation of vaccines authorized for emergency use by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the condition to apply for quarantine exemption.

1. South Korea is the first country to exempt individuals who received a Chinese vaccine from quarantine.

According to the quarantine exemption policy, regardless of what kind of vaccine an individual was given, a person who is inoculated with vaccines authorized for emergency use by the WHO is considered a fully vaccinated person exempt from quarantine. These include Pfizer, Moderna, Janssen, AstraZeneca, Covishield, Sinopharm and Sinovac. Among these shots, Sinopharm and Sinovac are Chinese vaccines. Even though Chinese vaccines were approved for emergency use by the WHO and used all around the world, distrust and concern about their safety and effectiveness have been raised. In this situation, the policy allows travelers who are inoculated with Chinese vaccines to enter South Korea without mandatory 14-day quarantine.

2. Increased entry of Chinese vaccinated individuals endangers Korea's domestic COVID-19 prevention measures.

The policy is unlikely to immediately lead to a deterioration of South Korea's domestic COVID-19 prevention measures. Firstly, there remain limited categories for which individuals are allowed to be exempt from quarantine even if fully vaccinated. Importantly, tourism remains closed. Secondly, South Korean health authorities will continue to monitor and manage individuals who are exempt from quarantine with COVID-19 diagnostic tests and self-diagnostic applications.

Nonetheless, South Korea's domestic COVID-19 situation is likely to worsen and stress existing prevention measures given the characteristics of personal exchanges between South Korea and China. As of May 2021, Chinese nationals accounted for 43.4% of foreigners staying in South Korea. Koreans with Chinese nationality account for 81.3% of all Koreans with foreign citizenship in South Korea. In this situation, the policy allows those seeking to visit immediate family members to apply for quarantine exemption. Regarding the ratio of foreigners in South Korea, visitors from China who want to visit family members in South Korea is likely to increase.

It is notable that almost visitors from China would be inoculated with Chinese vaccines. This is because only Chinese vaccines are administered in China. Considering questions about the effectiveness of Chinese vaccines, relaxed guidelines for vaccinated individuals, and the spread of new virus variants, an increase in the number of visitors from China and their subsequent travel to different places in the country may exacerbate the pandemic situation in South Korea.

3. South Korea's inconsistent quarantine policy causes distrust in government policy.

Currently Chinese vaccines are not used in South Korea. Aside from domestic distrust about Chinese vaccines, this is because the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) has not conducted safety tests on Chinese vaccines. All vaccines used in South Korea, including AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Janssen, and Moderna, are approved through the MFDS's evaluation and approval procedures. This strict and objective evaluation process has contributed to building trust in South Korea's quarantine policy. Especially, the South Korean government has emphasized the strict evaluation procedures by the MFDS, when concerns about vaccine inoculation were initially raised.

For example, the government dispelled worries about the side-effects of AstraZeneca and approved its inoculation on February 10 on the basis of the MFDS's test results. This was even before the WHO approved AstraZeneca for emergency use. In that sense, the fact that the South Korean government authorized Chinese vaccines for quarantine exemption despite external and domestic distrust can lead to a misunderstanding that the government implemented the policy with political intentions. This may cause distrust in the government's quarantine policy and hinder the people's cooperation for prevention against COVID-19.

4. The quarantine exemption is one-way and undermines the principle of reciprocity.

The Chinese government has not provided corresponding measures to South Korea's exemption policy. At the same time, it has utilized the policy as an opportunity to promote Chinese vaccines in the international community. Even as the Chinese government is practicing a strict entry and quarantine policy to all overseas visitors, Korea's policy seems to show confidence in Chinese vaccines and is in China's favor. The South Korean government needs to affirmatively endeavor to obtain some corresponding measures through consultations with China.

Of course, the principle of reciprocity should be approached with caution on the issue of easing travel restrictions as China might also seek demands of its own in other areas. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there is a growing consensus in South Korea that China has not abided by the principle of reciprocity in bilateral relations as evidenced by cases of unilateral decisions by China. In that sense, the current policy is likely to increase anti-China sentiment in South Korea and impede South Korea-China cooperation in COVID-19 prevention.

5. South Korea's K-Quarantine diplomacy is constrained by US-China vaccine competition.

With US-China vaccine competition intensifying, South Korea's quarantine exemption policy is likely to signal to the international community that South Korea is favorably inclined to China and thus limit South Korea's efforts to diplomatically promote its pandemic response. Whatever the South Korean government's intentions, China seized it as an opportunity to promote its vaccines and vaccine passport and increase its influence in the international community. Even if the South Korean health authorities keep monitoring and managing individuals who received Chinese vaccines, Western countries, who have cast doubts about the safety and effectiveness of Chinese vaccines, are likely to use South Korea's COVID-19 prevention as leverage. If US-China strategic competition continues intensifying, the US and its partners may pressure South Korea under the pretext of the relaxed exemption policy for individuals who received Chinese vaccines, regardless of possible infection rates.

In addition, South Korea's participation in proposed travel bubbles with other countries might be put at risk. There are already travel bubbles in place between Hong Kong and Singapore as well as between Australia and New Zealand. The Korean government has reportedly been in talks to create such a bubble with Singapore, Taiwan, Guam, and Saipan to allow unrestricted international travel. This is only possible because Korea has shown it is a role model in pandemic management with its K-Quarantine strategy and built trust. It is worth recalling that at the beginning of the pandemic, many countries closed their borders to South Korea, not because of an increase in domestic cases but because the government refused to impose a travel ban with China.

How should the South Korean government respond?

The South Korean government should take four clear steps to manage and minimize the risks posed by the quarantine exemption policy. Firstly, Korean health authorities should implement strict domestic testing and evaluation for Chinese vaccines to ensure compliance with existing standards. This should involve appropriate data collection requests from China. Secondly, the Korean government should refrain from taking a political approach to quarantine exemption and adhere to health advice and principles. With the growing prevalence of new COVID variants, the government must ensure a reliable institution such as the MFDS is in charge of vaccine testing and approvals rather than simply accepting WHO or other countries' policies. Thirdly, additional response measures need to be prepared to manage any increase in overseas arrivals and to prevent possible outbreaks. Finally, Korea should continue to carefully promote cooperation on COVID-19 prevention with China and other countries while observing the progress of the COVID-19 pandemic. But such cooperation should not be unilateral or undertaken with other political or economic objectives in mind. As the pandemic enters a new phase, South Korea should plan for a wide range of contingencies while ensuring that protecting the people is its first priority.

*This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2021-22).

(‘중국산 백신 접종완료자 격리면제의 쟁점과 향후 대응’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=80632>)