

Vaccine Maitri: India faces a balancing act with its COVID-19 diplomacy

India, like other large countries, hopes its own vaccine, Covaxin, can help the nation find routes to international trade and economic cooperation amid regional hostilities. The West is observing the world's largest democracy and starting to believe that it can become a counterbalancing force to China's rising regional influence and power. Vishal Rana, Parth Patel, Syed Mohyuddin, and Prajit Deb write about the geopolitical implications of New Delhi's "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, which the government hopes will help India become an integral part of the new world order.

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely [disrupted international trade](#) between nations around the world. It has forced businesses to shut down, left millions of people around the world jobless, and significantly disrupted the supply chain for interdependent nations. Amidst the already existing chaos due to COVID-19, the world has also witnessed a significant increase in deteriorating diplomatic relations amongst many countries, which seems to have fuelled an environment of mistrust.

To regain the misplaced trust and to build new alliances, which some call "[the new world order](#)", the first step taken by some countries is to engage in "[vaccine diplomacy](#)". These countries are using their jabs to strengthen regional ties and enhance their global image and soft power. Although many nations like China, Russia, and other emerging economies have engaged in vaccine diplomacy, only very few seem to have excelled at it and [India seems to be one of them](#).

Initially, the international media had little faith in the Indian government's efforts in [coping with the COVID-19](#) pandemic as coronavirus cases reached a million mark and they continue to rise. With a densely populated nation like India, which has a population of [1.39 billion people](#) and counting, it would have taken a miracle to stop the spread of the pandemic. However, through immediate interventions such as [lockdown of international borders](#) very early on in the pandemic, India has somewhat managed to curb the spread of the virus, which may have saved many lives, even though the country is once again dealing with an explosion of new infections.

In fact, India is currently battling a second wave of COVID-19 which is far more aggressive and deadly than the first. The country has exceeded world records, with more than 300,000 infections and a death toll of more than 2000 cases daily. While the government is busy trying to manage the spread of coronavirus, it did something that we would otherwise not easily associate with India, a developing nation: it decided to help other vulnerable countries around the globe by providing free vaccines.

Under the leadership of prime minister Narendra Modi, India has seen a significant shift from previous governments, with the focus on "[Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, and Sabka Vishwas](#)" (together, for everyone's growth, with everyone's trust). So, the focus of [India's foreign policy](#) is now on improving relations with other countries that are of strategic importance.

The country not only developed its indigenous coronavirus vaccine, "[Covaxin](#)", but also started supplying it to several other nations around the world. For example, under the government's "[Vaccine Maitri](#)" (i.e., vaccine friendship) initiative, a shipment of 870,000 doses of vaccine was sent to Mexico in February 2021. Being the pharmacy of the world, India manufactures 60% of global vaccines and is home to some of the world's major drug manufacturers like Sun Pharma, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Cipla, and so on. In fact, during this current COVID-19 pandemic, India became the first country to [give its homegrown vaccine](#) to the World Health Organisation (WHO) for distribution in poorer parts of the world, free of cost.

Vaccine Maitri is largely seen as India's attempt to become an integral part of the new world order by playing a constructive role in international relations. As a result, Covaxin has been shipped to most of the country's neighbours, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Nepal. And to other parts of the world like the Seychelles, Cambodia, Mongolia, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and many countries in Africa. This initiative has certainly helped India promote a positive country-of-origin image around the world as it aims to show other countries that it believes in being a good world citizen by finding solutions to global issues rather than creating problems for other countries. Besides, India's Vaccine Maitri initiative has also helped the country mend its lately strained relations with Bangladesh and cement friendly ties with the Maldives.

Consider the global pre-COVID geopolitical situation. Two of the most powerful nations in the world were at loggerheads, after Donald Trump [accused China of being unfair](#) in business deals with American companies, which led to a trade war. In the South China Sea, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam challenged China's claim to about 90 per cent of the waters, leading to uneasiness between the US, China, and many other countries in South East Asia. The world is witnessing the rise of China, its growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and its intensifying efforts to dominate the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which offer loans to small developing nations and are now under threat due to China's "Belt and Road" initiative. The prospect of the Asian century is looking more uncertain and scarier.

The West is keenly observing India and starting to believe that the world's largest democracy can become a counterbalancing force to China's rising regional influence and power. This can be seen in India becoming a key member of the QUAD alliance with the US, Japan, and Australia, engaging in military and maritime exercises, and enhancing its regional cooperation with other like-minded democracies. Although India's own capacity to manufacture the COVID-19 vaccine is helping the country take on China to project itself to the world as an ideal partner for trade and international relations, it also raises many questions that are yet to be answered. The most significant question is whether India's vaccine diplomacy will lead to more economic cooperation with other nations in the Asian region and beyond. Further, how will India conduct a balancing act using this diplomacy to solve border disputes with China and Pakistan, while seeking economic cooperation for its internal growth and development? Only time will tell, but one thing is certain, the strategic importance of India's *Vaccine Maitri* initiative cannot be ignored. A new contender is vying for strategic influence in the South Asian region and that is India.



Notes:

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