

China's Vaccine Diplomacy in South Asia: Geopolitical Perspective

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Abstract

For major nations to increase their geopolitical influence around the world, health diplomacy has remained a crucial component of their foreign policies. Given the outbreak of COVID-19, the inadequate health-care systems, even of the developed countries, have been exposed. Although China was blamed for the origination of COVID-19, concomitantly, the same nation has utilized the emergency in the global health field to further its geopolitical hegemonic influence by putting its diplomacy in the area of global health. On April 27, 2021, Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, participated in a video conference together with his colleagues from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bangladesh. In an effort to coordinate efforts and talk about Chinese aid in the fight against COVID-19 in neighboring nations and post-pandemic recovery, a virtual conference was held. Chinese actions in the area since the coronavirus outbreak have emphasized Beijing's efforts to strengthen its soft power and diplomacy. The article's major conclusion is that China increased its global influence by pursuing health diplomacy to the greatest possible extent. It focuses on China's use of soft power through its diplomatic efforts in global health. It also looks at how India's own problems have given China more room to operate in the area.

Key words: China, coronavirus, COVID-19, healthcare, India, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, which engulfed the globe in January 2020, continues to present public health, food systems, and employment with never-before-seen obstacles, leading to widespread destruction of businesses and communities as well as human life. However, the epidemic is more than just a human catastrophe or a financial issue. When it comes to managing and responding to the pandemic, politics has taken center stage. Political decision-making at the domestic level has either stressed or enhanced epidemic management, where some measures were more effective than others, despite the strength of a health system.^[1] Internationally, the difficulties required concerted actions from nations, including sharing resources and the knowledge. This reality did not exclude South Asia. The region has been worst affected by the pandemic and has faced several difficult circumstances. The containment of the pandemic is further complicated by the enormous population, subpar healthcare facilities, a high level of poverty, poor socioeconomic conditions, restricted access to resources for

human development, and unstable political regimes. The South Asian region crossed 30 million infections on May 28, 2021, and India saw its greatest number of COVID-19 fatalities since the epidemic started in 2020. According to Reuters, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka are responsible for approximately 10% of all deaths and 18% of all cases worldwide, which may not even accurately reflect the severity of the issue.^[2] Evidently, the pandemic has placed enormous stress on health infrastructure in these countries, and the disruptions for businesses and economic activities have intensified the distress for the governments. Due to the unexpected nature of the pandemic and its difficulties, smaller countries have been forced to seek outside assistance. India was the first nation to address the South Asian problem, but New Delhi's own difficulties in controlling the pandemic have given China a chance to step forward as the rescuer [Figure 1].^[3]

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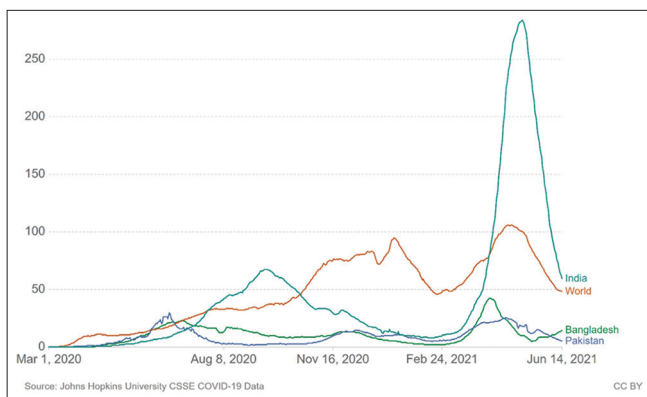


Figure 1: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in selected South Asian countries and the world, March 2020–June 2021

At a multilateral level, Asian countries participate in organizations important in global health governance, such as the U.N., World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, International Vaccine Institute, the World Bank, and the WTO [Figure 2].^[4]

INDIA'S EFFORTS DURING PANDEMIC IN SOUTH ASIA

India was the region's first responder in South Asia. For years, India was seen as the major public goods and service provider for the neighborhood, especially in providing healthcare, education, training, and scientific and technical support.^[5] India implemented a two-pronged strategy that focused on its "Neighborhood First" policy, as the pandemic struck the area. On the one hand, it gave a regional cooperation organization in South Asia (SAARC) new life as a venue for creating a regional action strategy with a focus on working together to fight the epidemic. However, it also used bilateral diplomacy to communicate with its neighbors.

In this context, SAARC leaders were urged by Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, will coordinate their efforts to combat the threat posed by the coronavirus using video conferencing. Modi launched a joint SAARC fund to fight the pandemic by extending a donation of US\$10 million (S\$13.24 million) during the inaugural video conference on March 15, 2020.^[6] Following this, the other member states also pledged their support for the SAARC fund for fighting the pandemic. Sri Lanka made a \$5 million (S\$6.62 million) contribution, followed by Bhutan (\$100,000; S\$132,000), Bangladesh (\$1.5 million; S\$1.99 million), and the Maldives (\$200,000; S\$265,000). Pakistan's US\$3 million (S\$3.97 million) contributions are placed with SAARC Secretariat.^[5] India later sent US\$1.7 million (S\$2.25 million) worth of medical equipment to Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka from the contribution it pledged to the fund.^[7]

India, one of the biggest manufacturers of pharmaceutical and medical items worldwide, has given its neighbors testing

Organization	Example(s) of health cooperation areas
<i>Regional Organizations</i>	
APEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Ministers' Meetings • Health Working Group (influenza preparedness, HIV/AIDS, improving health through health information technologies) • Infectious disease surveillance
ASEAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIV/AIDS • SARS • Avian influenza A (H5N1) • Influenza A (H1N1)
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pandemic influenza • HIV/AIDS • Tuberculosis • Malaria
South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing on infectious disease outbreaks • Sharing of health knowledge and expertise • Sharing of drug manufacturing capacities • Adopting regional standards on drugs and pharmaceuticals
<i>Identity- or Status-Based Organizations and Initiatives</i>	
G-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to antiretrovirals for HIV/AIDS • Malaria • Tuberculosis • Avian influenza A (H5N1) • Polio • Bioterrorism • Improving health systems
Organization of the Islamic Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polio • Malaria • Tobacco control • Pandemic and avian influenza • Health equity in the Islamic Ummah
South-South collaborations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health care delivery • Food security • Child labor • Hunger • Poverty

Figure 2: Regional, identity-based, or status-based intergovernmental organizations' health activities involving Asian countries

kits and medical supplies to aid with their growing scarcity. India supplied three shipments of crucial medical supplies to Bangladesh between March 25 and May 6, 2020.^[8] From April to May 2020, it has provided four consignments of medical essentials to Sri Lanka, including 13 tonnes of the shipment of necessary, life-saving drugs in April,^[9] and another 12.5 tonnes of medicines and equipment in May.^[10] It provided Nepal with test kits, 320,000 paracetamol dosages, 250,000 HCQ dosages, and other medical supplies. An additional delivery of 30,000 PCR kits and 28 ventilators for intensive care units was provided to Nepal by New Delhi in May 2020.

As soon as the AstraZeneca vaccine, which was jointly produced with the Serum Institute of India (SII), hit the market, India started sending supplies to its neighbors as grant-in-aid. On January 15, 2021, India began its immunization campaign, and 4 days later, 150,000 doses of the vaccine were administered in Bhutan. Two million doses were given to Bangladesh, one million to Nepal, 100,000 to the Maldives, and 500,000 to Sri Lanka. A few nations made orders with SII to purchase extra dosages. For instance, Bangladesh inked a contract in November 2020 to buy 30

million doses. Sri Lanka made a purchase of 13.5 million doses in February 2021.^[11]

While these programs improved New Delhi's ability to project soft power and portrayed it as a neighbor who makes an effort to support its neighbors in times of need, subsequent events have resulted in a barrier. Without the necessary medical infrastructure to handle the issue, India's health infrastructure is under pressure as a novel variation discovered, there has had fatal ramifications of a second wave at home. Despite being one of the biggest manufacturers of medical equipment worldwide, New Delhi is unable to satisfy the domestic demand. In addition, its vaccine production was stopped, leaving nations like Sri Lanka, which has already paid for doses, to find new suppliers.

China, whose vaccine was approved by the WHO, has effectively been given an opportunity as a result of this. China is involved in vaccination diplomacy in the region surrounding India in addition to infrastructural diplomacy. India has been alarmed by China's expanding influence in what it sees as its backyard. Neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have become more dependent on China for COVID-19 vaccinations ever since India stopped exporting its vaccines.

CHINA'S HEALTH DIPLOMACY

China founded the Global Community of Health for All during a domestic health crisis, and through it, it has exchanged more than 70 times with regional and international organizations and helped the global community through humanitarian means.^[12] By May 31, 2020, it had deployed medical expert teams to 27 nations and provided aid to 150 nations. Between March 01, 2020, and May 31, 2020, China alone supplied safety equipment to 150 countries. These include 112 million pairs of goggles, 40.29 million infrared thermometers, 96,700 ventilators, 226 million test kits, and 70.6 billion masks.

Chinese pandemic diplomacy has benefited South Asia from the start, even though Beijing's own condition had not yet improved. China sent Bangladesh its first shipment of 500 quick test kits in February 2020. It also provided emergency and anti-epidemic medical supplies. Beijing dispatched a team of medical professionals to Dhaka in June 2020 to aid in the capital's pandemic response. The technical aspects of collaboration in vaccine production and research are also being discussed between China and Bangladesh.^[13] On March 28, 2020, China provided all the vital medical supplies to Pakistan.^[14] It additionally gave Gilgit-balochistan medical supplies, as it was asked by its local government.^[15] China also supplied three batches of crucial medical supplies and safety gear to Sri Lanka between March and June 2020.^[16]

China has also helped almost all South Asian counties in its infrastructural and economic projects. It was predicted by the

World Bank that countries in South Asia will face economic distress in 2020 where Sri Lanka's economic crisis, Pakistan's catastrophic floods, a global slowdown, and impacts of the war in Ukraine, South Asian countries are facing immense difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic.^[17] China has extended financial assistance to South Asian nations to stabilize their foreign exchange reserves and deal with their budgetary problems. To pay off Saudi Arabia's debt, Pakistan was given a US\$1.5 billion (S\$1.99 billion) lending line. As part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, China has given Pakistan loans totaling US\$6 billion (S\$7.94 billion) to build the Main Line (ML-1) project (CPEC). In March 2020, a concessional loan of US\$500 million has been granted to China, then in September 2020, it gave Sri Lanka another US\$90 million (S\$119 million) grant. In March 2021, China authorized a currency swap deal with Sri Lanka worth US\$1.54 billion (S\$2.04 billion) to promote trade and investment and ease Sri Lanka's financial problems. A month later, the China Development Bank has given Sri-Lanka a US\$500 million loan to help with its foreign exchange issue.

Similar to this, the Chinese sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, authorized a US\$250 million (S\$331 million) loan and a further US\$100 million (S\$132.4 million) loan to Bangladesh between May and August 2020 to aid in the fight against the epidemic. A \$1 billion (S\$1.32 billion) credit from China has also been offered to Dhaka for the effort to regulate the Teesta river. According to a duty-free deal made in June 2020 between Bangladesh and China, 97% of Bangladeshi goods are now able to enter the Chinese market duty-free.

China organized many virtual meetings with South Asian nations, emulating India's SAARC virtual summit effort, to advance closer coordination in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In July 2020, it also organized a summit for South Asian countries. This was followed by virtual meetings in November 2020 and January 2021. The Maldives, Bhutan, and India were not present during the summit, India was also included in the invitation, and the "Door is wide open" for all countries in the region to join the framework, according to Foreign Minister Wang Yi. However, India refused the invitation and said it had not recognized the initiative, that it had made more considerable attempts on its own to interact with its neighbors.^[18]

The six South Asian countries decided to institutionalize their cooperation, hold regular consultations, and broaden the scope of their cooperation. In addition to the China-South Asia Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre and the China-South Asia E-Commerce Cooperation Forum on Poverty Alleviation in Rural Areas, China has decided to establish the China-South Asia Emergency Supplies Reserve. China stated its wish to assist India in handling the crisis. According to official numbers posted by Sun Weidong, the Chinese ambassador to India, Around 10,000 life supporting systems and 21,569 oxygen generators have been shipped from China to India, more than 21,48 million masks, and over 3,800 tonnes of pharmaceuticals since April [Figure 3].^[19]



Figure 3: Chinese vaccine sales and donations around the world

A GROWING INTEREST IN CHINA'S VACCINE

When the first quarter of 2021 came to a close, China had exported vaccinations to 43 nations, according to information that was readily available. Half of the total doses of vaccinations produced were exported, amounting to 115 million doses.^[20] The General Administration of Customs reported that in the first quarter of 2021, vaccination exports amounted 11.9 billion RMB, (approximately S\$2.52 billion).

Pakistan obtained more than four million doses of vaccination in April from China after receiving the first batch of 1.2 million doses in February. Mostly in the following 2 months, it is projected to receive more than 15 million doses. Recently, China has also donated 600,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to Sri Lanka, Nepal received 800,000 doses in March 2021. Bangladesh has also turned to China and authorized the vaccination process, with the use of vaccine created by a subsidiary of Sinopharm in China for emergency situations. Colombo began administering Sinopharm in May 2021. Bangladesh has also turned to China for vaccine created by a subsidiary of Sinopharm in China for emergency situations.

CONCLUSION

It is intriguing to see how China is advancing South Asian vaccine diplomacy at the cost to India, whose domestic circumstances prevent it from restarting manufacturing and exports. The Small South Asian nations have turned to China to obtain vaccine doses in order to speed their immunization programs in the wake of a devastating new wave of the pandemic and vaccine shortage. In addition, these countries' demand has increased as a result of the WHO's approval of the Sinopharm vaccine.

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 epidemic represents a health emergency, politics and geopolitics have influenced how it has been addressed. Health diplomacy is being used by regional and international powers to calibrate and rebalance the power equation. China is maintaining its standing as a provider for the area as it works to expand its influence into South Asia.

At the time, when the COVID-19 crisis and vaccine diplomacy had given India a much-needed platform to lead regional cooperation in South Asia, India's forced export halt and the rise of Chinese influence may have enormous political and geopolitical ramifications. China's initiatives in the former's neighborhood gain momentum as a result of India's paralysis brought on by the fresh round of diseases. We all know that protecting its population is always a priority for a country like India, but at the same time, it has certain moral responsibilities toward the region. India should try to speed-fast its vaccine production so that it can meet the growing need of South Asian countries.

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