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PROJECTING POWER THROUGH HEALING: INDIA'S VACCINE MAITRI INITIATIVE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

India's concept of Internationalism can be traced back to the time when the concept of "Vasudhaiva Katumbukam," which refers to the world as a family. In addition to opportunism and realism, India's culture and traditions continue to have a strong impact on its foreign policy choices. In this globalized world, it is not possible for a single country to find solutions for most problems in the world; rather, the world requires collective efforts to address it. India's Vaccine Maitri program is a prime example of health diplomacy, where the strategic allocation of COVID-19 vaccines to nations in the Global South served as an instrument for soft power projection. This essay critically analyses India's reputation as a responsible international stakeholder and regional leader in South-South cooperation under its "Vaccine Maitri" initiative. In doing so, India has come to be regarded as the "Pharmacy of the World" and provided the vaccines along with much-needed medical supplies to poor nations, thereby boosting India's Soft Power reputation in "Health diplomacy". Based on an examination of policy declarations, diplomatic interactions, and responses from the recipient countries, the paper delves into the manner in which India's health outreach was realized as strategic successes within the context of international relations and development diplomacy.

KEYWORDS: *Diplomacy, Soft power, Engagement, Vaccine, Global health, Partnership, South-South Cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

"The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a global outbreak of coronavirus – an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)" (World Health Organization, 2025). Novel coronavirus cases were initially reported in China in December 2019, and the virus spread quickly to other nations worldwide. The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis has been historic. The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis has been historic. WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 and to declare the outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The crisis has put into focus dire fragilities and inequalities both within and across countries. "In addition to the threat to public health, the economic and social disruption threatens the long-term livelihoods and wellbeing of millions, The world has been profoundly affected by the global virus pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis. To emerge out of this crisis, there will be a need for a whole-of-society, whole-of-government and whole-of-the-world approach based on compassion and solidarity" (United Nations, 2020). Various COVID-19 vaccines have already received approval and distribution in different countries, most of which have already launched mass vaccination drives. Vaccine diplomacy refers to the use and/or distribution of vaccines to enhance the diplomatic relations between a country and other nations. Vaccine diplomacy is a small part of healthcare diplomacy or medical diplomacy. Although the term 'vaccine diplomacy' is in vogue today, the phenomenon has been around for centuries. Nations have shared medical equipment and personnel, treatment protocols, health texts, and other materials during times of crisis. Ancient travellers and writers have also written at length about healthcare practices in some areas. National-states indulge in the practice to endorse and advance foreign policy interests since a health crisis is experienced by people of every class from everywhere (Wankhede, 2023). "Vaccine diplomacy is the use and/or delivery of vaccines to improve a country's diplomatic relations with other countries" (Wankhede, 2023). The Global South refers to parts of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania that constitute developing countries with similar histories of colonization and economic exclusion. India's position in the Global South is critical, using its increasing economic strength, democratic order, and geostrategic location to promote global governance that is equitable (Arya, 2025). This paper examines how India's Vaccine Maitri was both a humanitarian effort and an exercise in strategic soft power projection, especially within the Global South. India's Vaccine Maitri program was a gesture of health solidarity, but it is also a test of "strategic humanitarianism" to enhance bilateral relations, promote India's soft power, and reaffirm its leadership in the Global South. By marrying altruism with geopolitical sensibility, India emerged as a normative power dedicated to inclusive global governance.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The strategic significance of health has shifted, since health has become a central part. In a transforming global setting health diplomacy is a significant negotiating forum for issues of global policy that determine and shape the global context for health. Numerous illustrations demonstrate that health diplomacy is effective and that aligning health and foreign policy can yield substantial health benefits. There is growing awareness of health as a foreign policy objective and as a major driver of

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development, peace, poverty reduction, social justice and human rights. Global Health Diplomacy (GHD) refers to the practice whereby governments and non-state actors seek to coordinate global policy solutions to enhance global health. Health diplomacy refers to a style of diplomacy that centres on safeguarding the health and welfare of populations across borders. It entails leveraging health issues to establish relations, encourage cooperation, and secure peace and stability among nations. Health diplomacy is a diplomacy area that combines the interests of global health and foreign policy. It brings together diverse participants in regions that impact public health throughout the world (DiploFoundation, 2023). Health diplomacy is a kind of soft power that is utilized in the 21st century. India has been practicing global health diplomacy to establish strong diplomatic ties (Kumar, 2021). India in this context has done South-South Cooperation which can be loosely understood as a mutual exchange of skills between governments, organizations, and individuals of developing countries. Through this system, the developing countries assist and aid one another with knowledge, technical support, and/or investments (Partners in Population and Development, 2010). This has been viewed as Strategic Humanitarianism, a hybrid strategy for aid and activism that blends humanitarian values with political action, frequently employed by organizations to tackle complicated humanitarian challenges

Vaccine Maitri: Scope and Strategy

With the advent of COVID 19, India started with its incredible campaign of Vaccine Maitri initiative which has not only been widely acclaimed but also shown what good diplomacy in challenging times is all about. India is internationally known for its pharma prowess and is famously said to be the home of the world's largest volume vaccine production facility. The nation also manufactures world's third largest volume of pharmaceuticals. Thus, India is referred to as the 'pharmacy of the world'. With a 20 per cent market share in the volume of generic drugs globally, India is also the world's largest exporter of generic medicines. The constant reiteration of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" by PM Modi has been guiding principle and gave shape to 'vaccine Maitri' as a foreign policy initiative to India. In the initial phase of the pandemic, India assisted more than 150 nations by quickly increasing its production of medical supplies and distributing it. January 20, 2021, India initiated the "Vaccine Maitri" program as a part of its humanitarian effort. Ever since, India has been donating and providing India-produced vaccines to nations around the world and has been at CenterStage of global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. India has used its drug-making capabilities to not only meet local requirements but also to send and donate COVID-19 vaccines to nations across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. It has donated and provided vaccine doses to more than 100 countries since then. The "Vaccine Maitri" campaign is significant as it places India and its rise as a responsible world power on the map. It provided India with the international spotlight of political attention during an international health pandemic. "Besides the general goodwill and diplomatic weightage, it earns, the campaign also provides an excellent model for India's future interactions with the world where it can play a leadership role without causing the geopolitical ripples which otherwise shatter global efforts" (Chawla, 2021). Under Vaccine Maitri, India provided more than 300 million doses to 101 countries till June, 2023. Of these, several million doses were donated, while others were given under commercial terms or through the COVAX facility, in association with the World Health Organization (WHO), (MEA India, 2023). Strategic beneficiaries were the neighbouring South Asian nations and it also presented India's "Neighbourhood First", south-south cooperation, and Act East policies in practice (DiploFoundation, 2023). Public-private vaccine production strategy of India, driven by Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech, was central to facilitating this outreach. Covishield and Covaxin vaccines were dispatched through diplomatic means while being coordinated by the Ministry of External Affairs. The initiative projected exercise in soft power thus improving India's international image and creating goodwill in areas where China was also working actively on vaccine diplomacy (Wankhede, 2023).

Case Studies: Health Diplomacy in Action

"Understanding its capabilities to provide aid, India, with its vast vaccine production capabilities and historical ties with the Global South, took a proactive stance with its Vaccine Maitri initiative. On January 20, 2021, Bhutan became the first recipient of India's COVID-19 vaccines as India supplied 150,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine, developed by Oxford-AstraZeneca and manufactured by the Serum Institute of India" (Chawla, 2021). This move was symbolic beyond words as it reasserted the strong political and cultural bonding between the two countries. Bhutan's Prime Minister Lotay Tshering openly appreciated India, saying the donation represented "generosity" and "friendship beyond diplomacy and trade." India's timely assistance allowed Bhutan to begin its country-wide vaccination campaign ahead of schedule, making it one of the quickest nations to vaccinate a large segment of its adult population. The action was viewed as a manifestation of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, focusing on regional unity during the time of international crisis. India's vaccine supply to Nepal comprised 1 million doses of Covishield, donated in January 2021. By supplying timely and free doses of vaccines, India sought to restore trust and goodwill with a traditionally close neighbour. The Nepali leadership, even as there has been growing Chinese investment in recent years, appreciated India's gesture. The health diplomacy step assisted India in reclaiming soft power influence which was reducing as a result of political tensions and Chinese Belt and Road Initiative economic competition. The case study points to how vaccine diplomacy as a non-coercive counter to strategic competition can present a humane and mutually helpful alternative to hard power strategies. India also donated 100,000 doses to Maldives and 500,000 doses to Sri Lanka, both geographically located in the Indian Ocean region. These nations, crucial for India's maritime security interests, were given high priority in the initial phase of Vaccine Maitri. Maldives' Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid had termed the act as "real-time diplomacy" and appreciated India's prompt action. Likewise, within Sri Lanka, Indian vaccines were broadcast widely and received by government and media alike as a sign of regional leadership. By matching medical outreach with maritime cooperation (e.g., SAGAR—Security and Growth for All in the Region), India was able to ensure its strategic aspirations within the Indian Ocean were accompanied by humanitarian good will. This strategy mixes

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old diplomacy with pandemic management, with a focus on health as national security.

India's Vaccine Maitri reached out to many African countries, such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. 'Seychelles was the first African country to receive the Indian made vaccines' (MP-IDSA, 2021). These were not gestures of charity alone; they represented India's time-tested policy of South-South cooperation. In Nigeria, 200,000 doses were given as a donation, which was utilized to immunize frontline workers. India's initiative was best received in West Africa, where Chinese influence has increased immensely with infrastructure and health initiatives. India's vaccine diplomacy was also a soft power instrument to regain its presence on the global platform by emphasizing collaborative developmental objectives rather than economic rivalry. According to Dr. Suresh Kumar, India's health diplomacy towards Africa is used as a "soft power tool" to foster resilient relationships with mutual development in place of dependence (Kumar, 2021). In a strategic gesture that extended India's international reach, vaccines were dispatched to Barbados, Dominica, Brazil, and Mexico. Notably, the government of Barbados profusely thanked India for the 100,000 doses it provided and Prime Minister Mia Mottley publicly thanked Prime Minister Modi. The gift of 2 million doses to Brazil, another BRICS country, was symbolic as well. Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro tweeted a historic photograph of Hindu god 'Hanuman' with the Sanjeevani herb, drawing an analogy between India's vaccine export and a lifesaving operation. This photograph diplomacy had a powerful cultural impact and framed India as a philanthropic power. The Dominica case is particularly noteworthy. A tiny Caribbean country with negligible global influence, Dominica got vaccines when many rich countries were hoarding them. This made India a leader in fair access, aligning with the ideals of vaccine equity promoted by the WHO.

India has been extending its soft power via vaccine Maitri initiative evolving into the extension of India's soft power and its vision of peace for the South. It has always been supportive of South-South cooperation and has stood since ages to assist its neighbours. The above-mentioned cases are good example of the way India has been going forward bringing along others and not going solo. The step taken by India has also benefited it in the realization of its foreign policy towards global south. India has made its soft power stronger through its goal of healing be it by yoga, meditation, disaster relief response, humanitarian assistance, medical equipment and in this instance by way of giving vaccines. Saving and healing life has been the final mantra taken up by India in reaction to such challenging scenario.

CONCLUSION

India's Vaccine Maitri initiative exemplifies the power of health diplomacy in advancing both humanitarian goals and strategic interests. By exporting vaccines to nations in the Global South, India became a responsible global player and a champion of South-South cooperation It may be argued that India's vaccine/health diplomacy in providing humanitarian and economic assistance has attracted the world's focus and neighbouring nations. India's efforts under the vaccine diplomacy have emerged to provide value to the health diplomacy of the nation and emerged with a space in people's hearts in the Global South. The pandemic has also underlined the reality that, in the next few decades, India will need to employ much of its resources in addressing non-conventional security issues such as access to healthcare for all citizens and enhancing the availability of food and medicines, among others. India's vaccine diplomacy has reaffirmed its position as the world's largest pharmaceutical producer. it has taken advantage of the pandemic to draw orders for other Western COVID-19 vaccines like Novavax and Janssen vaccines, and Western pharma investments to India. Not only did the program meet immediate public health imperatives, but it also reinforced bilateral ties, increased India's soft power, and promoted a story of solidarity and leadership. India needs to become a benevolent regional power before seeking global leadership. India will need to work on its economic growth, strengthening issue-based multilateral and plurilateral arrangements, and sustained development. India has always had the problem of geopolitical competition from China in the South as also globally. In the context of rising US-China competition, the US and most other industrialised nations are increasingly backing India with the QUAD, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and bilateral efforts to balance Chinese influence, and vaccine cooperation is prominent in these efforts. As an example of strategic altruism, Vaccine Maitri illustrates how global health initiatives can bolster geopolitical influence while advancing sustainable and inclusive international engagement based on mutual respect and common development interests.

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