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# **China-India Great Power Competition and Vaccine Diplomacy in South Asia in the Age of COVID-19**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In the chessboard of South Asian geopolitics, vaccine vial triggered a strategic war between India and China to advance diplomatic interests. This dissertation unpacks the impact of SinoIndian initiatives during COVID-19, on competition for regional hegemony in South Asia through health diplomacy. With Theoretical frameworks grounded in realism, neo-realism and rational actor model, the study segues to compare diplomatic tactics, regional outreach and commercial and humanitarian vaccine distribution. It postulates that India's vaccine diplomacy, underpinned by *Neighbourhood First Policy* and *Vaccine Maitri*, leveraged its capabilities to counterbalance Chinese influence. While Beijing focused on bilateral vaccine distribution aligned with its Belt and Road Initiative, India reinforced multilateralism in the regional arena. The research highlights India's soft power strategy in asserting its role as *net security provider* in South Asia and IOR. Additionally, domestic COVID crisis in India revealed the delicate balance between national needs and international commitments, offering insights for future geopolitical scenario

## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

1. **BBIN:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal
2. **BCG:** Bacillus Calmette-Guérin
3. **BIMSTEC:** Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral and Economic Cooperation
4. **BRI:** Belt and Road Initiative
5. **COVAX:** Covid-19 Vaccine Global access
6. **CPEC:** China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
7. **EAM:** External Affairs Minister
8. **GAVI:** Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations
9. **GDP:** Gross domestic product
10. **HADR:** Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
11. **HCQ:** Hydroxychloroquine
12. **HIV/AIDS:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
13. **ICMR:** Indian Council Of Medical Research
14. **INS :** Indian Navy Ship
15. **IOR:** Indian Ocean Region
16. **ITEC:** Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation

17. **MEA:** Ministry of External Affairs
18. **NFP:** Neighbourhood First Policy
19. **NSA:** National Security Advisor
20. **PM:** prime minister
21. **PPE:** Personal Protective Equipment
22. **PPP:** Purchasing Power Parity
23. **PRC:** People's Republic of China
24. **QUAD:** Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
25. **R&D:** Research and Development
26. **RAM:** Rational actor model
27. **SAARC:** South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
28. **SAGAR:** Security And Growth for All in the Region
29. **SII:** Serum Institute of India
30. **UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund
31. **US:** United States of America
32. **USSR:** Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
33. **WHO:** World Health Organization

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus has catalysed the world with shifts in geo-economic, geopolitical and geotechnological developments, stressing the global order due to wider transformations in South Asia and Indo-Pacific primarily. China-India bilateral is a consequential relationship enshrining both cooperation and competition. There are divergences between the two nations over China's intention of gaining a foothold in India's periphery and after the military standoff between the two in 2020 in Ladakh, at a time when the world was grappling with COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship turned abnormal. Since then, India under Narendra Modi's leadership is constantly upping its capabilities on military, economic and diplomatic fronts. Amidst the black swan event of pandemic, China engaged in vaccine diplomacy, with two Asian giants being ahead of other wealthy nations in terms of global donations.

Vaccine diplomacy is considered an essential foreign policy asset for leveraging regional and global strategies. Countries engage in foreign aid, for moral, political and economic objectives (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2003). South Asia is important for China-India due to its geographical positioning, intra-regional trade and geostrategic communication. Apart from humanitarian concerns, regarding geopolitics India and China indulged with states of south Asia, that are part of BRI and SAARC, to address significant strategic security concerns whereas the economic aspect deals with commercial ties, emphasising trade dependency with recipient nations and future relations implication.

India is apprehensive about China's growing influence in its immediate neighbourhood and is aware of the tactics that China uses to pressure South Asian nations and garner geopolitical clout. Thus great power competition between Sino-India during vaccine diplomacy led India to not only vaccinate its domestic populace but also assist neighbouring countries (Pant, Mankikar, 2024). Through vaccine and global health diplomacy, India aligned its humanitarian

assistance with the civilizational ethos of Indian foreign policy, demonstrating reciprocation by small states during the second wave and later geopolitically strengthening ties.

## **1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS**

Regarding this, the research, question specifically addressed is:

*Q. To what extent did Sino-India initiatives during the COVID-19 Pandemic contribute to strategic competition for regional hegemony in South Asia?*

The literature cites the strategic framework of great power competition between China and India in South Asia within the strand of Global health diplomacy, specifically through the case study of vaccine diplomacy. Historically, medical diplomacy has been flexed globally to address public health crises and protect geopolitical interests, for instance in 2001 US provided aid to sub-Saharan African countries against the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Fidler, 2021). This was not only for humanitarian purposes but to preserve global stability and security as per the US's foreign policy objectives. Such a disease could lead to a failed state, which could be exploited by transnational terrorists undermining national security. Through this strategic move, US mitigated the health crisis while countering influence of China and Russia by enhancing its soft power. The research analyses how nations utilised instruments of realpolitik through bilateral channels to fulfil geopolitical interests through strategic vaccine allocation. Both China and India displayed regional ambitions by using vaccine diplomacy as a global strategy and thus existing literature helps to build an argument to support the following hypothesis:

*H: India's initiatives during COVID-19 through vaccine and health diplomacy leveraged its capabilities to limit China's influence in South Asia*

This dissertation supports the hypothesis by highlighting India's covid missions in South Asia and its ability to have a regional-based foreign policy objective to produce vaccines at low cost



and gain a nation branding humanitarily and not solely for economic or geopolitical motives, through two waves of the COVID 19 pandemic.

The research gap addressed in this research engages with how Beijing and New Delhi utilise soft power tactics like vaccine diplomacy to impact their hard power capabilities advancing economic and political objectives in gaining foothold in competition to become a regional hegemon. Majorly, the objective of this research is to emphasise India's vaccine framework in South Asia and extended neighbourhood to trace its geopolitical dynamic against China through vaccine diplomacy in South Asia, further affecting the global south. The research also compares how China was more geo-strategically inclined while India focused on humanitarian diplomacy in terms of economic objectives based on vaccine R&D, production and rollout. Lastly, the research analyses soft power objectives solely based on competition to provide public goods to neighbours enhancing public imagery to gain regional influence.

## 1.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

### *1.2.1 Theoretical framework*

This study is built on the theoretical framework of realism and neo-realism. Classical realism as highlighted in seminal works like *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* by Hans Morgenthau (1948), contends that states are inherently power-hungry due to the anarchic nature of the international system and as a result, states engage in competition for dominance and are aggressive in enhancing their material capabilities. China's expansionist trajectory through its economic prowess, enhanced military capability and assertive stance in foreign policy, ascends it to the category of a global power. This argument can be bolstered in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), where Mearsheimer posits that states leverage their interests by becoming the strongest player in the regional or international realm and engage in efforts to limit potential hegemon's capabilities. During the pandemic, through vaccine diplomacy, China and India sought to gain influence from South Asian neighbours to fulfil long-term strategic goals. Thus, in pursuit of maximising power, states try to mend the

existing order to better reflect their own interest and other states in competition seek to maintain or defend the current status quo in their attempt to become a “regional hegemon”.

India constantly repositions itself as a rising power with its pragmatic and collaborative foreign policy which emphasises alliance-building and multilateralism (Malone, Mohan, Raghavan, 2015). Thus, to limit China’s hegemonic advocacy in regional south Asia and safeguard the extended neighbourhood in IOR, India through its open regionalism by strengthening strategic partnerships and integration of trade and investment can create a balance of power in the region. The balance of power theory unpacked from the works of Thucydides, Hobbes and Morgenthau, suggests that the power capabilities of major states are balanced to maintain their supremacy in regional or international arena to restore the equilibrium. Neorealist, Waltz (1979) posits that the international system is under a balancing phenomenon due to a shift in the capabilities of states. Furthermore, rising states in an anarchic system are perceived as a threat, and the tactic of balancing power is a rational approach. India’s enhanced capabilities in vaccine diplomacy, aimed to create a network of dependencies to counter China and strategically use its resources to be an essential player in regional health security, furthering its reputation in future aspirations. Neorealism doesn’t necessarily indulge in counterbalancing strategic interests if the state is not perceived to be a threat to the immediate national interest in a power competition.

Thus, both states display tenets of classical and neo-realism. Firstly, China-India's actions are aimed at expanding their presence in the regional landscape geopolitically and economically through its vaccine diplomacy. Secondly, both resort to soft power enhancement during the pandemic to generate goodwill and strategic alliances followed by emphasis on dialogues with multilateral partners for shaping regional dynamics and power projections (Kumar, 2022b). Lastly, the research also focuses on how small states interact within the realist paradigm to maximise their own interest and prevent from getting attacked by big states.

Realism perceives states to be rational actors pursuing purposive decisions they seek survival in the international realm through accountability of their interests (Mearsheimer, 1994). Thus,

Rational Actor Model (RAM) is also employed in this study where “beliefs” are rational imperatives to achieve the end goal. Joseph Nye (2009) mentions about exclusion of behavioural phenomena in determining outcomes of hard power realities, however, RAM provides a basis to scrutinise rational choice of states to justify their behaviour in power competition. In this research, RAM helps to determine how vaccine diplomacy during COVID19 served as a strategic situation for China-India to display their leadership by making choices regarding the fulfilment of its foreign policy interest. The model further studies enhancement of strategic interest against the backdrop of interdependence of soft power decisions with longterm aspirations of states in South Asian neighbourhoods (Elster, 1986).

Indian vaccine diplomacy measures and strategies pursued with neighbours help to understand the sum game of cooperation and conflict, where it leveraged its capabilities by engaging in tactical decision-making to minimise Chinese influence and addressed strained relationships via regional cooperation for its own interest to prevent Beijing’s expansion through its infrastructural projects (Schmidt and Wight, 2023). Furthermore, examination of cost and benefit analysis in the era of vaccine diplomacy helps us to explore the utility theory of rational choice in balancing small diplomatic wins with longer-term goals of geostrategic competition between New Delhi and Beijing and helps to understand public opinion through soft power calculations. Despite the struggle in South Asian neighbourhood, China-India aim to achieve optimal benefits for one another for instance amidst tensions India is dependent on China for the trade of essential defence technology, thus India aims to limit China by maintaining a balance of power, preventing it from being a regional hegemon and adopt a non-confrontational strategy to create stability (Damayanti, Karyoprawiro, 2022).

The limitations of applying Realism and Neorealism through RAM lie in its singular foreign policy decision-making, the approach overlooks states’ organisational foundation, morality and the need for institutional dynamics to raise concerns. Rational choice is perceived to be deterministic as it focuses on contemporary challenges, without considering historical cycles of past decisions(Alden, 2017). RAM is understudied in the realm of non-traditional security measures like the pandemic as it oversimplifies issues, involving multiple stakeholders. The model views state actions driven by competitive interests and struggles to explain unilateral power or multilateralism aiming at international cooperation.

### *1.2.2 Methodology*

The paper assesses mutual relationship between geopolitics and vaccine diplomacy in shaping the regional order, through qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data, along with illustrations. The study employs primary data sourced from reputed newspapers including The Diplomat, New York Times, Business Standards, the Hindu, BBC and others to critically explore strategic goals embedded in vaccine programs. Additionally, data is derived from speeches, annual reports and government releases published by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. The comprehensive datasets enable us to examine the diplomatic conduct of these two nations with South Asian neighbours. Secondary sources like journal articles, research papers, business reviews and data published by institutions like WHO are used to unpack how these nations used vaccine diplomacy to expand their foreign policy objectives at regional level to inspect long-term consequences. Illustrations are made from research papers, MEA for dataset on Indian vaccine supply and the UNICEF COVID Dashboard.

The comparative methodology is an essential tool of this research facilitating an in-depth analysis of China-India's foreign policy focusing on their power outreach in South Asia through the case of vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This model enables states to identify self-interest in the realm of geopolitics, political economy and soft power by emphasising participation in regional integration projects and trade dependencies of recipient regions, further contributing to debates surrounding great power competition between China and India. Thus, the comparative analytical framework along with qualitative, illustrationbased data explains the hypothesis through detailed descriptions and informed conjectures.

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

### 2.1 STRATEGIC IDEALS

China and India are Asia's two pivotal rapidly rising powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, shaping contemporary global politics, with nature of their relationship being historical and unique. The regional relationship between these two nations helps to analyse the global power competition in regions like South Asia, Indo-Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. The Sino- Indian relations highlight patterns of cooperation and conflict in realm of political and economic aspirations which led to evolution of power dynamics between both countries, further inducing shifts in strategical thoughts of foreign policies to determine outcomes of the regional and international circumstances. The foreign policy of two Asian giants became fierce due to adjustments in long-term strategies, especially after the shift of leadership from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.

Godwin (2004) suggests that China envisions itself as a potential hegemon which highlights the state's capabilities to dominate a region by overthrowing powers of the competitive neighbours. The subsequent presence of secondary regional power, like India in South Asia, constraints China's scope of achieving hegemony in South Asia, and later the broader geopolitical landscape. Gilboy and Heginbotham (2012) in *Chinese and Indian Strategic Behaviour* highlight that Chinese foreign policy's strategic orientation appears to be aggressively driven by hawkish tactical stance on world affairs. Over the past decade Beijing, increasingly emphasised its diplomatic prowess, military and economic cooperation to instil greater influence throughout Asia.

Alternatively, India has been repositioning itself as a rising power through its foreign policy stance on multilateralism, considering importance of global and regional analysis, in the current liberal international order (Malone, Mohan, Raghavan, 2015). In regional South Asia, India's strategic motive is to limit China's scope of influence through its military, political and economic expansion. The Indian foreign policy employs the nation to seek a hedging strategy to achieve goal of being a South Asian regional hegemon in future, whilst maintaining its tenet

of “strategic autonomy” to avoid antagonism, and diplomatically address vicissitude disputes with China to be an autonomous power regionally and globally ensuring geopolitical balance on Chinese periphery.

Despite China-India converging on issues like climate change, global trade and others, China’s assertive policies have challenged India consecutively through its enhanced military muscle, persistent border contentions and presence of naval force in extended neighbourhoods, to acquire hierarchy posing a grave threat even without direct confrontations. Moreover, Beijing’s increased relevance in international organisations and multilateral bodies, provides China with an enhanced playing field, refraining India from complying with its strategic goals of strengthening partnerships and indulging in multilateral engagement for amplifying voice and reliability in global affairs (Pant, Manikar, 2024).

For China and India, South Asia serves as a significant geopolitical arena, where historically India was seen as an influential power in terms of its population, geographical area, economic and military strength. However, India used its influence to safeguard its national security interests, undervaluing infrastructural needs and the market economy of other South Asian countries (Ramakrishnan, 2023). China utilised this vacuum in its favour to intensify ties with South Asian nations, knowing the region's vital interest for India. In South Asia, India aimed to balance Chinese influence through cooperation, but Beijing perceives it to be a threat as New Delhi could increase its regional influence hampering Chinese security aspects (Nga and Thuong, 2021).

*In Sino-Indian ties under Modi* (Pant, Manikar, 2024), Given the strategic importance of South Asia, it’s being argued that both China and India tend to seek influential threshold to garner dominant position of being a potential hegemon to fulfil their strategic calculations and later formulate policies to reduce conflicts in the neighbourhood. From a foreign policy perspective, India aims to grasp power in South Asian neighbourhood to ensure territorial security by enhancing geopolitical prowess, in overcoming structural issues like Chinese penetration into the Indian territories of Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. China, conversely, aims for influence due to the region's geographical positioning, benefiting it due to proximity to extended

neighbourhoods and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that can impact China's stability, development and security.

China is steadfast in its commitment to expand its 2013 "Belt and Road Initiative" in South Asia (Nga and Thuong, 2021). From great power competition perspective between India and China, It is tenable to suggest that China seeks to leverage its position by ensuring South Asia becomes the intersection of Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road which aligns the region to pursue its "String of Pearl" strategy. This tactical move by China poses a barrier for India in maintaining its geo-strategic hold in South Asia and extended neighbourhoods. South Asia has undergone a flux of geopolitical and geoeconomic motives as India and China vie to enhance their influence and expand foreign policy ideals on the wider geopolitical compass. Diplomatically India engages with South Asia multilaterally and bilaterally as globalisation has accelerated the world towards multipolarity. Through leadership in organisations like SAARC, India promised regional stability in the region, while it continues to pursue strategic autonomy in relationships with nations like Pakistan, due to a troubled past. EAM of India, S Jaishankar quoted the relevance of the Neighbourhood First Policy initiated by PM Modi, which approaches South Asia as a political and economic priority through its outcome-oriented and consultative strategies through trade and development and emphasises improving lines of connectivity, health and infrastructure, to fulfil vision of making the region secure and stable (Jaishankar, 2024).

New Delhi through its accommodative foreign policy has timely balanced its strategic relationship with small states like Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal by resolving disagreements through peaceful negotiations (Nga and Thuong, 2021). Contrarily, China employs bilateral communications and strategy of encroachment to expand its presence in small countries of the region. Arguably, strategic competition between China - India intensifies its bilateral relations approach in regional South Asia.

The tussle for power enables Beijing to forge special relationships with neighbours like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal and to further expand power relations and achieve its infrastructural goals, subduing Indian influence due to its loopholes in relationship with

neighbours regarding territorial disputes. China uses its foreign policy models of debt trap diplomacy (Ramakrishnan, 2023), financially burdening small states with debts to help China intrude in the South Asian region to secure its interests. Moreover, through wolf warrior style of diplomacy, China enforces reliance on states like Pakistan and Nepal, by making them realise their past commitments and its historical support at times towards them at times of disputes, further enhancing investment and cooperation in the area.

## **2.2 GLOBAL HEALTH**

The optimism for improved China-India relations in the Modi era by advancement in bilateralism through people-to-people contact and dialogues on economic, political and security issues, was short-lived further sparking great power competition between the two countries, following the military clashes in the Galwan region of Ladakh in June 2020, when India was grappled with the black swan event of COVID 19 pandemic (Pant, Manikar, 2024). Since then, the relationship between two nations has become abnormal with a shift in stance from engagement to escalation towards one another, altering the status quo. Following existing structural issues, China- India during the COVID-19 pandemic engaged in power competition through global health diplomacy, emphasising vaccine diplomacy, to garner influence in the South Asian neighbourhood. The work of Kickbush and Liu in *Global Health Diplomacy* (Kickbusch and Liu, 2022) highlights that diplomacy in past decades has been a constitutive part of global health governance and the pandemic gathered global leaders with strained past to formulate a negotiated response towards the crisis. This research reflects how health diplomacy is an avenue for geopolitical growth and changing power relations.

Global health diplomacy arguably adopts a multifaceted approach, examining areas of trade and security, where health emergencies are tackled by the involvement of a wide array of actors in multilevel diplomacy with negotiations occurring in non-health-related multilateral organisations, enabling collective action. Despite this, states while focusing on their health interest, engage in competition regarding national interest, which plausibly restricts the path of a unanimous decision in setting health norms and jurisdictional standards. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine diplomacy, a subset of science diplomacy became increasingly relevant. Foreign policy ideals of powers evolve despite strategic competition, because soft power elements like medical diplomacy back in history, helped to enhance country's needs



while meeting demands of the global challenges, for instance In 1960s with the heightening of the Cold War USSR and the US collaborated to combat Polio in Hungary (Vargha, 2014). Thus, COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of vaccine diplomacy between China-India demonstrates economic and political realities configuring geopolitical interest. These nations despite their altruistic stance on vaccine diplomacy, have strategically aligned with key nations in supplying vaccine doses, motives driven by self-interest.

Vaccine diplomacy intensified attempts to develop an effective vaccine to combat the COVID19 virus, leading to overt economic competition in terms of development and manufacturing of the vaccine followed by its rollout ('Vaccine Diplomacy in the Wake of COVID-19 | Wilson Center', 2022.). The suspension of IPR followed by imposition of sanctions restricted the state's ability to supply vaccines in areas of its national security interests. Through medical bilateralism, states built and renewed strategic links, for instance India attempted to resolve disputes with Bangladesh and Nepal to secure futuristic goals, while China aimed to strengthen its Health Silk Road initiative based on the receptivity of neighbours.

With the mechanism of vaccine diplomacy, Apolinário Junior (2023) argues that China and India progressed ahead of several nations in efforts to bilaterally donate vaccines, majorly due to strategy of South-South cooperation. Health diplomacy enables states to leverage their geopolitical standing by utilising soft power components through passive actions, such interactions further shape the realist parameters of hard power, resulting in the state becoming a *smart power* (Nye, 2009). It can be posited that there are limits to achievements of hard power making vaccine diplomacy a tool of contextual intelligence with mechanical combination of how the soft power element impacts geopolitical rivalry between China-India in South Asia based on their regional dynamics. Strategically this diplomacy offers insights into prepandemic and post-pandemic regional aspirations of China and India. These nations are influential regional powers however, neither acquired stance of being a hegemon in South Asia yet. The neighbourhood states like Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Afghanistan can either bandwagon or pursue their independent foreign policies in relation to China and India and parallelly these powers can only influence to seek support from these small states and not

coercively control them. Thus, using Joseph Nye's (2009) model of smart power it is clearly seen that international relations exclude the importance of behavioural factors of soft power like vaccine diplomacy and are focused only on material power to assess influence in great power competition between nations.

As a contextual intelligence tool, vaccine diplomacy strategically enhances study of global health diplomacy of China and India, analysing their foreign policy objectives through integrated tactics like public diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and development assistance in the pandemic, combining aspects of soft power and hard power. It can be argued that while the scope of soft power is limited and understudied, it contributes to the domino effect in IR, where shifts in the realm of hard power through instances of military disputes influence power structures, leading to competition among states. This competition restricts state actions but allows it to autonomously pursue objectives and values, to gain influence through bilateral and multilateral dialogues with allies.

*Vaccine diplomacy framework for India* (Rao et al., 2021) suggests that through vaccine diplomacy, India aims to fortify its medical research capabilities and contribute to public health by taking advantage of its position as the "Pharmacy of the world" further leveraging its capabilities to achieve global health standards through vaccine distribution. However, it can be examined that vaccine diplomacy enables India to strengthen areas of its geopolitical interest by prioritising vaccine supply within the South Asian neighbourhood, in lieu of its political dynamics vis-a-vis China. India through NFP supplied vaccines and provided economic aid to states like Bangladesh and Maldives, to not only cultivate cordial ties but also counter Chinese influence in the neighbourhood furthering its regional and international image.

During the pandemic, China advocated for fair and equitable vaccine supply to ensure global public good and international justice, however it can be seen as an ulterior motive of China to fulfil its economic and political ambitions while positioning itself as a potential hegemon in South Asia by countering geopolitical rivalry with India. China portrayed its manufacturing and technological prowess and its foothold across global markets. However, upon analysis of existing literature, China seeks fulfilment of global ambitions through regional diplomacy and uses vaccine distribution as a tactic to project power. Strengthening ties via bilateral channels

fulfils opportunistic interests of China through the advancement of significant infrastructural projects like the Belt and Road Initiative by supplying its homegrown vaccines. The BRI project in the post-COVID world is an impetus for Beijing's initiative of "Health Silk Road" aligning with its foreign policy objectives and thus production, expansion and development of new health technology leverages the nation's soft power capabilities in South Asia.

Beijing and New Delhi used the opportunity to provide masks, medicines and homegrown vaccines to economically disadvantaged nations, as later these small states will comply with big states' interest due to enhanced influence to gain an upper hand in geostrategic contests (New York Times, 2021). Future implications of health diplomacy pursued in China-India power competition can be critically analysed highlighting, that China seeks entrapment and strangulation strategy against India by influencing South Asia and extended neighbourhood in the IOR, supporting its stance in infrastructural projects and its tactical ideology of "String of Pearls". On the contrary, India through its multilateral approach seeks to garner support from small states and prevent them from China's hawkish debt-trap strategy, to be in the race of being a regional hegemon by leveraging its diplomatic capabilities in countering China's outreach in the neighbourhood.

## **CHAPTER 3: GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATION**

The Sino-Indian rivalry has evolved with increased competition in areas of military warfare and infrastructural development within locations of strategic relevance, where motives were exacerbated by both nations to gain influence in regions of South Asia and extended neighbourhood of the IOR. China challenges India in the scope of gaining nation branding within South Asian neighbours to position itself as a regional hegemon and pursue political and economic interests (Donnellon-May, 2023). For China, South Asia is an arena for expansion and gaining control of the Indian Ocean from a realist stance, India accuses China of unilaterally changing the regional status quo through its aggressive acts like construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan as part of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which hampers Indian national security under its infrastructural development strategy.

### **3.1 CHINA**

The Pandemic outbreak in China weakened its ability to provide aid in the beginning, however, as the world's largest economy in the world in terms of GDP in PPP with an estimated value of \$34.64 trillion (World Bank, 2023), China is compelled to maintain its status of being an

emerging regional and global power. Beijing's initial diplomatic strategy emphasized delivering masks and respiratory equipment to developing countries, but later China recognized vaccines as *global public good*, further refining the policy approach to vaccine diplomacy. It can be contended that China engaged with South Asian nations to expand its geopolitical clout to penetrate the BRI project among partner nations which is an economic silk road leading to health, trade, infrastructural and people connectivity. China resorts to strategies like "wolf warrior diplomacy" to engage with potential and existing allies to retain influence by making them realise commitments to sustain its initiatives (Sud, 2020).

Beijing's vaccine and medical diplomatic aid is fuelled by geostrategic and realpolitik agendas rather than humanitarian considerations, for instance, vaccine supply to Bangladesh was seen as a means to negotiate for its BRI-related projects, but Bangladesh in March 2020 phased out from the BRI coal project in Gazaria (Han and WANG, 2021) sighting unsustainable conditions and fear of control of port by China. Chinese foreign policy undertakes an assertive approach to its aspirational claims by resorting to coercive diplomatic tactics like "debt-trap diplomacy". This strategy was evident during vaccine diplomacy, particularly in Sri Lanka, where in 2017, due to its inability to service debt on the Hambantota port, led to the port being leased to a Chinese state-owned company. Later, Beijing politicised vaccine distribution, using debt as a means to demand concessions and extend its regional influence.

Likely, in 2020 pandemic choked Chinese supplies for BRI due to indebtedness of nations and support of Pakistan over control of Gwadar port, leading to an encirclement strategy against India to gain control over string of pearls, a political and military initiative over control of ports to enhance influence in Asia. This justifies intentions of China's expansion and use of ports as naval bases (Apolinário Júnior et al., 2023). Arguably, China supplied vaccines primarily to nations of South Asia that are part of the BRI project, this highlights a positive relationship between vaccine donations and commercial aspects of China. Beijing has pursued its vaccine diplomacy majorly through bilateral channels as a regional strategic operation rather than pure altruism, This is evident in Chinese action of exporting vaccines to 43 nations, where the volume of exports outnumbered its donations by a hundred times, made to 69 nations regionally and globally (Yang, 2021).

From a realist perspective, China did not completely engage in philanthropy by donating vaccines, it also sold vaccines and PPE gears in regional South Asia reflecting its foreign policy ideals, where China can find a way to influence powers that further shape its sovereignty and reputation in the region (Kane, 2001). This aligns with Morgenthau's argument where he suggests that pursuit of national interest is based on foundations on which the foreign policy of a country is formulated and since states pursue power, they have to act rationally in an anarchic system (Nobel, 1995). Thus it can be argued that China through its mask diplomacy, later transitioning to vaccine diplomacy with recurrent trials in nations where it sought a cost-benefit relationship, helped to maximise its utility. The rational outcome of China's strategic move highlights its use of soft power as a means to achieve ends in the realm of hard power capabilities.

Through the notion of rational utility, Beijing strategically invested its efforts with nations like Pakistan to gain reputational advantage, it administered nearly 500,000 vaccines to Pakistan to counter New Delhi's influence in the region (Biswas, 2021). China offered support to Pakistan to reduce the risk of India approaching first despite its rivalry. This offered China, to seek geopolitical gain amidst the Pakistan-India existing animosity and further challenge India's position of being a regional hegemon in South Asia.

Apart from this China through its belligerent diplomatic tactics like wolf warrior diplomacy and debt-trap diplomacy seeks to gain strategic leverage in aligning nations with its long-term goals through manipulative means. Like with Nepal, China supplied vaccines and medicines, while gaining quid pro quo through support towards its infrastructural projects and expansionism, Nepal continued its support towards China-led BRI and many more multimillion dollar hydropower projects in the country in 2018. China used benefits from Nepal to counter Indian hegemony, exploiting strained relationship between the two over a border dispute involving the area of Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh, where New Delhi's heightened fear of Beijing's incursion in Nepalese territory, further strained ties between Nepal-India. Through such strategies, China aimed to enhance its relevance in regional and international forums with

increased dependencies on the neighbouring states and confirmed alignment with its goals in future projects and emergencies. It can be posited that China instils its quid pro quo agenda with South Asian countries involved in the BRI to fulfil building the Health Silk Road initiative by using vaccine diplomacy and medical aid as a means to expand regional influence and share of market. Furthermore, it makes Beijing's rhetoric of vaccines as a global public good disingenuous (Huang, 2022). This motive results in China expecting to maximise its national interest through strengthened diplomatic connections.

Building on this argument, it can be implied that China pursued its hawkish tactics in the extended neighbourhood of the IOR to strive towards its expansionist interests, by engaging in regional politics, to achieve regional hegemonic powers in South Asia. China through its strategic rational choice interacted with neighbours like Maldives and Sri Lanka to ensure maritime communication and Beijing's freight movement effectively from ports, via the presence of military bases and surveillance ships, resulting in the entrapment of India to an extent, followed by China's secured presence in the region. Thus from a realist paradigm, China engaged with South Asian neighbours to inculcate its security considerations by securing ports and simultaneously fulfil its self-interest by showcasing itself as a reliable partner through medical diplomatic measures.

China carefully deployed its *Hexiao Konda* tactic (Huang, 2022) to influence small countries and regulate large-scale state actions. Beijing's stance on vaccine diplomacy can be analysed to be deceptive through actions towards policies, *Wang Yi*, foreign minister of the PRC quotes in his speech that " China has no political motive and economic calculations from vaccine diplomacy and has no political string attached to it" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). However, China's preferential donation of vaccines in 2021, despite low cases and death rates in countries like Sri Lanka, reveals China's way of obscuring its developmental goals. China's approach rationally exemplifies tactics of strategic deception (Mearsheimer, 2011, p.30 ) to achieve a lead over the potential adversary, India, through this aim to acquire cooperation and trust from nations in South Asia. Thus China tends to control a non-traditional security aspect to leverage its attempt to gain absolute control over a region.

## 3.2 INDIA

The Sino-Indian relationship has been shaped by regional friction, focused on China's push along the Himalayas and more widely in South Asia and the extended neighbourhood of IOR. India's former NSA, MK Narayan emphasised that China, not being enemies, but the competition for great power between these two civilisations, creates problems about them being friends (Choudhury, 2020). The strategic environment changed in South Asia at the beginning of 2020 due to security threats both traditional and non-traditional in nature. Post the military skirmish between India and China at the Galwan region of Ladakh, the tussle in global health diplomacy through vaccine diplomacy began, to seek leverage in regional South Asia and the extended neighbourhood.

### 3.2.1 *Neighbourhood First Policy*

India through its vaccine diplomacy aimed to garner influence by generating goodwill amongst regional and international players, envisioning balanced power in the context of growing Chinese influence. The Indian foreign policy emphasises India pursuing interests bilaterally but has championed in groupings, projecting its regional and global governance (Malone, Mohan, Raghavan, 2015, p.581). India's policy of *Neighbourhood First* guides to manage relations with immediate regional areas mainly constituting Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The policy aims to augment trade and people-to-people connectivity in the region, becoming a priority for the Government of India to manage relations with neighbours.

Arguably, India diplomatically relies on fostering relations with South Asia, from the perspective of an evolved ideology from idealism to realism, emphasising reciprocity. PM Narendra Modi expedited diplomatic manoeuvres to further strengthen this policy during the pandemic, ensuring that neighbours are pursued "First" on New Delhi's diplomatic radar, to safeguard India's strategic and economic interests. The policy was pursued, through the lens of vaccine diplomacy to ensure vaccine distribution and cooperation within the Global South, based on its civilizational concept of "*Rajamandala*" (Ojha, 2023) which visualises India



through concentric circles where the neighbourhood is given priority and then global issues are endeavoured. India cultivates cordial relations with its neighbours, to safeguard its security through new developmental partnerships and security arrangements, making this approach primordial in Indian foreign affairs.

Indian foreign policy enhanced its health diplomacy by improving relations with other states, prioritising health security within the traditional notion of human security, followed by increased equity (Singh et al., 2023). Hence, India initiated its vaccine diplomacy under the policy of “neighbourhood first”, validating its position as the *net security provider* of regional South Asia ensuring stability and security. It can be argued from a neorealist stance that the integration of NFP with health diplomacy allowed India the leverage to engage with its regional ambitions. New Delhi aimed to balance power in South Asia by interacting with small states, preventing power accumulation by one state further changing the system’s structure, thus ensuring its own survival in the geopolitical arena (Waltz, 1979, p.104-106). Under this policy, India adopted two two-way approaches, the first was to supply medical kits and vaccines bilaterally and the second was through a regional action plan, reactivating multilateral organisations like SAARC.

India has a history of both humanitarian assistance and medical diplomacy, with its missions to intervene at times of natural disasters in South Asia and the IOR, following India has supplied volumes of indigenous vaccines at affordable rates for polio, rotavirus, BCG, HIV/AIDS among other diseases. India opted for humanitarian diplomacy vis-a-vis the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure global solidarity by offering assistance, medical equipment and vaccines to over 100 nations, bolstering its potential as the “Pharmacy of the world, enabling it to enlarge geostrategic scope in great power competition with China in South Asia’s geopolitical arena. Rationally, it can be implied that India adopted benevolent diplomatic measures and leadership during the pandemic to align its long-term goals by considering power configuration, interests, strategic goals and public image, to counter influence of rising China while maintaining balance of power in South Asia. Thus, in IR, states’ act is considered to be important, when dealing with a critical situation, ensuring that the decision-making aligns with foreign policy ideals to achieve national interest.

India bilaterally donated nearly 2 million vaccine doses to Bangladesh, 1 million doses to Nepal and 500,000 each to Afghanistan and Sri Lanka in January 2021. Apart from this India has extended its donations to IOR nations like Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles (Yang, 2021). India delivered nearly 240 million doses by first half of 2021, both India and China didn't indulge in vaccine diplomacy purely altruistically, but to leverage their position as a smart power. As Joseph Nye (2009) suggests that despite soft power being insufficient, it can be an enabling or disabling factor in policy-making, determining hard power capabilities. Thus, vaccine diplomacy employed by these two Asian giants acts as a strategic soft power tool of humanitarian aid, arguably to gain reputational benefits through diplomatic tactics to elevate geopolitical stature in regional South Asia.

India being the first responder to the crisis prioritised vaccine accessibility in its neighbourhood and ensured delivery of the first consignment of Oxford AstraZeneca-Serum Institute of India manufactured, Covishield and Bharat-Biotech manufactured Indigenous Covaxin to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives and regions of IOR (Sibal, 2021). India actively pursued diplomatic initiatives like Vaccine Maitri and Mission SAGAR to embody the non-reciprocal notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which views the world as one family (Nandy and Naha, 2022). Hence, during COVID, India strived to fulfil its strategic goals by providing aid with a focus on pursuing long-term goals that eventually require reciprocity, supporting to maintain balance of power in the region without expecting immediate results.

### ***3.2.2 Bilateral Means***

Through global health diplomacy, India took the lead in assisting nations regarding the pandemic and supplied paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) to nearly 55 countries including South Asian neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Suneja, 2020), emerging as a responsible and reliable power. This can be viewed as a means to use vaccines to acquire bargaining power over diplomatic qualms in South Asia. Using vaccine assistance schemes India proceeded with its commercial exports and donations.

In 2021, Bhutan received the first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines with 0.55 million doses on a grant basis from India (Bose, 2021), considering both nations share a history of amicable relations based on goodwill and trust. India aims to gain support from its pandemic assistance from Bhutan to enhance its infrastructural initiatives and sub-regional trade. New Delhi remains vigilant of Beijing's motive of expansion in Bhutan through investments and trade, without interfering in the domestic affairs of other states. Thus, vaccine diplomacy enables cooperative and strong bilateral relations that arguably, act as a sensible means to maintain balance of power in the region (Waltz, 1979, p.118) ensuring that Bhutan aligns with India's interest in hydropower infrastructure, education and security commitments in the wake of Chinese aggression.

With Bangladesh, India aimed to pacify its strained ties due to recent contentions regarding the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Teesta water agreement, through vaccine diplomacy. India geopolitically proceeded with priority supply of vaccines to counter Chinese influence in the region and as a result, the cost of vaccine supply benefitted India to smoothen its relations as Sheikh Hasina reinaugurated the Chilahati- Haldibari trans-border railways between the two nations that was closed since 1965. Moreover, in 2020 Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Bangladesh amid rising border tensions with China. COVID diplomacy resulted in the signing of seven agreements related to trade, energy and agriculture with promises of enhanced commitment and efforts to tackle the remaining issues (The Business Standard', 2020). It can be argued that India strategically planned its diplomatic leadership by using ITEC programmes for capacity building, strengthening health and humanitarian diplomacy in the neighbourhood, and forging long-term developmental partnerships (Pattanaik, 2021). This comprehensive approach helps to analyse India's efforts to limit Chinese strategic value through improved global health and security cooperation. Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina in return assured India of preventing the use of Bangladesh for anti-Indian terrorism, signifying reduced risk of Bangladesh to lean towards China in future.

Sri Lanka, for both China and India, holds trade significance due to its geographical positioning and serves as a strategically important sea lane. Due to China's debt trap diplomacy and strategic acquisition of the Hambantota port, led India to provide humanitarian assistance through diplomatic visits and its vaccine donations, showcasing New Delhi's altruistic stance (Pattanaik, 2021). However, India tries to counter Chinese expansion through its enhanced foreign relations by providing doses of help. Sri Lanka's security concern over China's naval presence and debt-trap diplomacy led the state to declare its strategic consideration of "India first" favouring Indian vaccines, reflecting a zero-sum game of India in South Asian power competition vis-a-vis China. The balance of power through bilateral alliances prevents one state from being dominant, which could disrupt the political equilibrium, thus Indian vaccine diplomacy effectively challenged China's political gains in the region, by its leveraged soft power capabilities further improving relations.

Tensions between Nepal and India escalated in recent years due to the Kalapani territorial dispute and its growing bandwagoning with China through BRI, enhancing connectivity. India sought diplomatic normalcy through medical diplomacy, in 2020 the former chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing, Samant Goel visited Nepal to discuss the dispute followed by a visit from chief of army staff MM Naravane, along with medical supplies to combat the pandemic (Nayak, 2020). New Delhi's diplomatic prowess continued with Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visit to prioritise vaccine supply initially. With Vaccine Maitri, New Delhi attempted to woo Kathmandu by dispatching 1.1 million doses with an additional purchase of 1 million doses from Serum Institute of India, to reduce burgeoning Chinese influence in South Asia. In the initial phase of vaccine diplomacy, China pressured Nepal to accept its vaccine without efficacy verification, highlighting Chinese encroachment tactics to expand power in the region for its sovereign interests (Kane, 2001).

Owing to terrorism, India and Pakistan's fraught relations hampered bilateral trade among the nations, there was no direct offer by India or Pakistan regarding COVID-19 medical assistance, and Pakistan mostly relied on China for vaccines. During the second wave, Pakistan offered relief material to India at the behest of release of Kashmiri prisoners as a humanitarian gesture

amidst the pandemic (Times of India 2021). This indicates a potential quid pro quo, as Pakistan aligns closely with China for its interest and China backs Pakistan for its strategic advantage.

Furthermore, India pursues its relationship with Afghanistan through HADR, to strengthen ties with the nation post-Taliban takeover. New Delhi granted 1 million vaccine doses and other medicines to Kabul (Pasricha, 2022). Arguably, it permits India to reinstate diplomatic relations between the two nations and further explore strategic and trade avenues. India has primarily invested billions to enhance soft power in Afghanistan to acquire long-term gains in other capabilities (Nye, 2009). New Delhi's health diplomacy approach enables it to maintain a regional balance of power amidst Beijing's growing influence through its strategic efforts to destabilise terrorism. However, India's stance is challenged due to Pakistan's closeness with the Taliban, posing a potential risk to Indian national security.

### ***3.2.3 Indian Ocean Region***

In the extended neighbourhood, IOR is a dynamic shipping route crucial for Sino-India, for the fulfilment of geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions. China is enhancing its strength in the IOR by aligning with partners in South Asia for its BRI project. China-India in IOR unpacks power competition, by strategically undertaking effective measures to achieve its ends at the hour of pandemic (Schmidt and Wight, 2023). To prevent nations of South Asia and IOR from being burdened by China's debt trap through its predatory loans, India bilaterally engaged to provide a pandemic assistance package worth \$250 million to countries like Maldives through the deployment of INS Kesari in September 2020 (Chadha, 2021).

This occurred after China asked Maldives to pay back \$10mn loan potentially triggering foreign exchange and trade crisis. India's Mission SAGAR, inspired by the Security and Growth for All in the Region initiative, enhanced its health diplomacy by being the first responder to the crisis in the region. To strengthen maritime security and enhance capacity building in IOR, India indulged in collaborative partnerships with countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles (ICS, 2020), to provide consignment of COVID-related medicines. New Delhi also offered these nations infrastructural projects worth \$91million (Chadha, 2022). It can be argued that it's a strategically planned decision to align own interests to counter the geopolitical interest of assertive and hegemonic powers like China by prioritising security and economic ties.

New Delhi thus engages in a balance of power by leveraging its capability as a net security provider in South Asia and IOR, analysing the risk of Beijing seeking universal domination (Waltz, 1979,p.119 ) by significant presence via its BRI projects.

### ***3.2.4 Multilateral means***

Through vaccine and health diplomacy India sought to leverage its position as a significant regional player in South Asia, to achieve this the nation aimed to boost regional integration by resorting to partnerships with multilateral forums like SAARC, QUAD, Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI) and WHO's COVAX facility. At a virtual meeting in 2020, New Delhi proposed political and diplomatic solutions including the announcement of a \$10 million regional COVID emergency fund where nations contributed to collectively combat the externality. Pakistan directly didn't participate in this initiative and contributed to the SAARC secretariat. Being part of such multilateral forums India, distributed GAVI and COVAX facilities with 100 million jabs of both SII manufactured "Covishield" through AstraZeneca and Bharat Biotech manufactured India's indigenous vaccine "Covaxin" (Singh et al., 2023). India under SAARC, accounted for 29.94% vaccine supply injecting a positive momentum to outshine Chinese power. Through this India provided health and humanitarian assistance to immediate and extended neighbourhoods followed by other developed nations globally, it can be viewed as a realpolitik geopolitical strategy providing a rationale for India to stabilize power in the region and prevent China's dominant expansion in political and economic domain (Waltz, 1979, p.117).

India was leading in COVID assistance by supplying hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and essential medicines across the region. Sri Lanka received nearly 13 tonnes of lifesaving medicine, followed by Bhutan which received 150,000 consignments of vaccines to combat COVID-19 (Pattanaik, 2021). However, due to difficulties in implementation in multilateral forums, India persistently focused on helping regional nations via bilateral and mini-lateral pacts. Health

diplomacy was furthered through forums like Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) working group (BBIN) followed by the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). India had made a more technical diplomatic choice by giving prime importance to Nepal and Bangladesh, due to China's BRI which poses a challenge to Indian foreign affairs. In March 2020, India advanced in the realm of global health diplomacy through the inclusion of e-ITEC initiatives for SAARC nations for enhancement of skill and training towards pandemic relief.

Furthermore, US-led QUAD supported India in vaccine distribution, expanding global vaccine supply. Despite India's criticism for operating outside the COVAX program, it displayed its efficient vaccine diplomacy by supplying vaccines to regional and global players, while vaccinating its own population (Prakash, 2021). The collaboration with multilateral forums indicates strategic altruism of India against China. This helps to analyse that India's focus to include QUAD for cooperation in South Asia and IOR is not just oriented towards humanitarian assistance but is also focused on security cooperation.

### **3.3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

During the pandemic China strategically aligned with nations in South Asia to advance the BRI, often regarded as the modern Silk Road. By expanding its focus towards health diplomacy, China employed wolf warrior and debt-trap diplomacy tactics, generating suspicion among the neighbours, which raised concerns about its aggressive stance, using medical aid to exert economic pressure and veiled threats on small states. Beijing portrayed itself as a responsible and stable ally during global uncertainty, it had to use strategic altruism to meet economic and political expectations of the international community to maximise its utility by preventing disengagement from its infrastructural projects, which would prove catastrophic for China due to its pre-existing investment in these projects (Slantchev, 2005). Sino-India great power competition is of utmost significance in South Asia, where vaccine and health diplomacy aided in ending polarisation of power. As a result, India leveraged its soft power capabilities during the first wave of the pandemic through its prepared response of supplying affordable vaccines, medicines and PPE kits, advancing regional influence.

India reduced its dependency on China post clash of Sino-Indian forces at the Galwan range of Ladakh in 2020, right after which China organised a virtual meeting with Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan to discuss cooperation in the pandemic. Exclusion of New Delhi highlights Beijing's assertive motive of instilling security threats at the border for India, to achieve the status of hegemon (Patranobis, 2020). It can be assessed that China evaluated the cost of vaccine diplomacy and aligned its interest with foreign policy ideals to gain benefits by strengthening its ties bilaterally.

Indian EAM, S. Jaishankar emphasises the implementation of NFP and Vaccine Maitri initiative as a means to revive economy and support vaccine distribution (MEA India, 2023a). From a neorealist perspective, this highlights strategic actions that states pursue in a competitive sphere to accommodate their ways of fulfilling interests. The second wave of pandemic wreaked havoc on India, during this phase India's vaccine-supplying capacity dwindled, leading to a halt in vaccine exports to meet domestic needs. China filled this void and made commercial exports of Sinopharm manufactured vaccines to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which implies its assertive leadership to achieve geopolitical gains.

China also supported multilateral forums to combat externality to counter India's geopolitical prowess and strategically joined COVAX in late October 2020, after initially engaging with nations bilaterally (Yang, 2021). The motive was to gain economic recognition and gain leverage from WHO for prioritisation of its vaccine. It can be contended that China under the guise of stabilising power in the region, sought to reinforce its strategic sovereignty while asserting its presence as a hegemonic power (Kane, 2001, p.51). Despite the balance of power, China will be unsatisfied and shall continue to pursue diplomatic tactics to fulfil its political and economic goals through decisions, favourable to its development.

Nevertheless, India leveraged its hard power geopolitical capabilities by extending soft power humanitarian assistance through global health diplomacy demonstrated by its NFP, Vaccine Maitri and Mission SAGAR ( IOR ) initiatives. Firstly, India was not selective in providing aid



to its neighbours and adopted a multilateral approach to tackle the situation by supplying doses via donations, commercial exports, COVAX facility and \$15million worth vaccine supply pledged to GAVI (MEA India, 2021). After a halt in vaccine exports during the second wave, India primarily approached its vaccine policy inward and managed to vaccinate more than 100 crore people through an efficient immunisation program. After securing domestic stability, India resumed sharing vaccines with COVAX facility of WHO, without interfering in domestic affairs of small states in the region, India propagated vaccine diplomacy through its civilizational policy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (Jaishankar, 2024) and maintained a balance of power by relying on its foreign policy ideal of strategic autonomy to achieve regional influence.

Secondly, India leveraged its medical science and technological capability to strengthen its position in South Asia and extended neighbourhoods. Despite challenges in dealing with the second wave, India throughout the beginning of pandemic, remained transparent regarding its share of vaccines in the regional and international sphere, unlike China, whose actions during the pandemic seemed to cause trouble for Sino-Indian relationship. Beyond vaccines, India supplied masks, PPEs and medicines and established e-ITEC programmes for South Asian states to provide training regarding medical assistance. Through SAARC, New Delhi offered expertise of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) for early diagnosis of the issue (Nandy and Naha, 2022).

WHO approved Indian vaccine due to higher efficacy, affordability and suitable transportation without the hassle of a cold supply chain. China's secretive stance regarding vaccine data and efficacy diminished its reliability as a partner. Arguably WHO's approval of Sinopharm manufactured vaccine appeared to be a hasty decision, influenced by India's struggles during the second wave, which shifted neighbour's alignment towards China. Lastly, India engaged in a quid pro quo with South Asian and international community in humanitarian and medical diplomacy. After India supplied vaccines in the first phase, 52 nations like Bangladesh, Bhutan (ANI,2021) reciprocated help during the second wave by providing medicines and oxygen, reinforcing regional ties for future commitments.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal being common recipients of aid from both nations highlight strategic altruism at play in global health diplomacy. These neighbouring nations recognize the competing interests of the two Asian giants and their need to maximise utility by strategically aligning policies to ensure survival (Schmidt and Wight, 2023). Thus, South Asia largely emphasises neutrality and non-alignment to safeguard its own interests, while contributing to the foreign policy needs of Sino-India. However, exceptions like Pakistan and Nepal arguably hedge towards China as a contingency measure to enhance their security, advance interests and offset threats from the other regional powers.

#### CHAPTER 4: ECONOMIC IMPLICATION

Geopolitically, South Asia has become significant for Sino-Indian relations, both Asian giants have exhibited relative interests by exerting economic and strategic pressures. In great power competition between China and India, China continues to pave its path in regional South Asia, through trade, developmental aid, investment and enhanced people-to-people engagement. China has leveraged its position over the years through its infrastructural BRI, however concerns regarding debt traps evident in nations like Sri Lanka and Maldives degraded its position in South Asia. Despite this, China's pragmatic engagement through COVID-19 medical aid posed a challenge to India's NFP in gaining influence among regional nations.

From the lens of classical realism, China's efforts can be seen to advance its interest and power (Williams, 2004, p639-640). Moreover, it can be posited that centrality of material power by enhancement of hard power capabilities is crucial, but the role of soft power is also critical. Soft power capabilities relationally act as a means that determine the behaviour of states to pursue foreign policy ends.

However, India projects power through its efforts to balance power in South Asia, undermining Chinese strategy of achieving regional hegemony (Das, 2022). New Delhi's presence as a large economy and an emerging power in the region advances its dynamism in geopolitical and economic realm. In June 2020 China-India skirmish at Galwan Valley in Ladakh drastically

transformed the trade relations between the two nations. Growing trade deficit and Chinese investment in the inroads of South Asia hampered India's perception of China. This image was solidified after the military dispute which posed border security constraints for India, as a result, the economic engagement between the two nations lost its momentum. Arguably, India's reduced economic dependency on China and alignment towards multilateralism indicates, New Delhi's rational course of action to seek survival in the international arena, while stabilising power (Schmidt and Wight, 2023). During the pandemic, India outperformed China in terms of exports despite attenuated relations with China and disrupted supply chains. Logistical issues in the first wave and opaque handling of the pandemic led countries to reduce dependency on China. India embarked on the ideology of self-reliance through *Atmanirbhar Bharat* movement, which aimed to help India in capacity building to mitigate global supply chain disruptions through enhanced availability of products(Kumar, 2022,p.23).

Sino-Indian power competition in South Asia not only focuses on geopolitical implications but enshrines on economic calculations. The pandemic marked the development of vaccines by non-western powers like China and India, resulting these nations to enhance their pharmaceutical R&D. Beijing focused on its vaccine R&D and majorly engaged in a bilateral distribution capacity, coercing its way in global markets, shifting power dynamics in the region. For instance, New Delhi's insufficiency in providing vaccines to Nepal due to its brutal second wave led China to provide Nepal with 800,000 doses of vaccines in March 2021(Das, 2022). This economic strategy aligns with the Chinese foreign policy ideal (Kane, 2001) of being a robust economy encouraging wider supply, to favour its interest in the international system. Rationally, China's market expansionism during the pandemic minimises the non-traditional security risk, whilst maximising benefits through its strengthened reputation among South Asian regions, helping it to shape regional and global markets. On the contrary, New Delhi emphasised bilateral and multilateral engagements in its attempt to stabilise power in South Asia. Bilaterally, recipient nations are targeted to maximise gains, while in multilateral settings, states interact based on common policy preferences, aimed to stabilise market and maintain regional dynamics (Kenneth N Waltz, 1979).

For China and India, vaccine R&D and technology transfer are effective means to encourage other states in the development of their pharmaceutical sector, offering reputational benefits in return. Bilateral trading helps nations to maximise their utility in terms of profits through vaccine distribution (Elster, 1986), whereas multilateral means help to enhance credibility, by broadening vaccine usage at regional and international levels, stabilising monopolistic control over vaccine R&D and distribution. China engaged with major vaccine manufacturers namely Sinopharm and Sinovac and collaborated with local pharma companies to test efficacy via clinical trials. Apart from vaccine altruism, this step underscores China's assertive intent to acquire foothold in emerging market economies, reflecting a realist approach for instance, Bangladesh aware of China's wolf warrior tactics deliberately declined to share cost of Sinovac vaccine's clinical trials and engaged with Indian vaccine diplomacy, knowing that Beijing will entrap Dhaka into its infrastructural and geopolitical ambitions through increased economic and strategic dependency (Gupta, 2021). Thus, China's bilateral aid portrays uneven vaccine distribution to gain geopolitical clout countering, India's regional growth. China through this justifies that soft power expansion will gradually undermine India's hard power capability in longer run, this is consistent from the lens of classical realism (Williams, 2004), which views power as an instrument to advance broader national interests.

India's vaccine diplomacy included producing Western-invented vaccines and their distribution through bilateral donations and multilateral forums like SAARC, QUAD and COVAX initiatives. In early 2021, Serum Institute of India (SII) produced Covishield, invented by AstraZeneca-Oxford. Covishield was cost-effective, with selling costs of the vial not higher than the production cost (Gettleman, 2020). India's manufacturing prowess enabled it to roll out vaccines extensively through its *Vaccine Maitri initiative*, India focused on bilateral donations with its neighbours due to NFP, under which Maldives and Bhutan were first to receive Indian aid by January 2020. India in the pandemic leveraged its capability through lowcost vaccine and medicine supply and additionally, New Delhi provided financial assistance to countries like Sri Lanka through currency swaps with repayment based on agreed exchange rate, to help these nations meet balance of payment and liquidity crisis until financial stability is maintained in the region (Khanna, 2020). The Government of India launched initiatives to

ensure provision of equipment like PPEs and oxygen cylinders while also training healthcare professionals in South Asia through its ITEC programs (Kumar, 2022).

### Supplies so far (In lakhs)

S.NO	COUNTRY	GRANT		COMMERCIAL		COVAX		TOTAL SUPPLY
		Quantity	Date of dispatch	Quantity	Date of dispatch	Quantity	Date of dispatch	
1.	BANGLADESH	33	(20) 21 Jan-21, (12) 26 March-21, (1) 2 April 2021	70	(50) 25 Jan-21, (20) 22 Feb-21			103
2.	NEPAL	11	(10) 21 Jan-21, (1) 28 March-21	10	20-Feb-21	3.48	5 March-21	24.48
3.	MALDIVES	2	(1) 20 Jan-21, (1) 19 Feb-21	1	29-March-21	0.12	6 March-21	3.12
4.	BHUTAN	5.5	(1.5) 20 Jan-21, (4) 21 March-21					5.5
5.	SRI LANKA	5	28-Jan-21	5	24-Feb-21	2.64	6 March-21	12.64
6.	AFGHANISTAN	5	7 Feb 2021			4.68	6 March 21	9.68

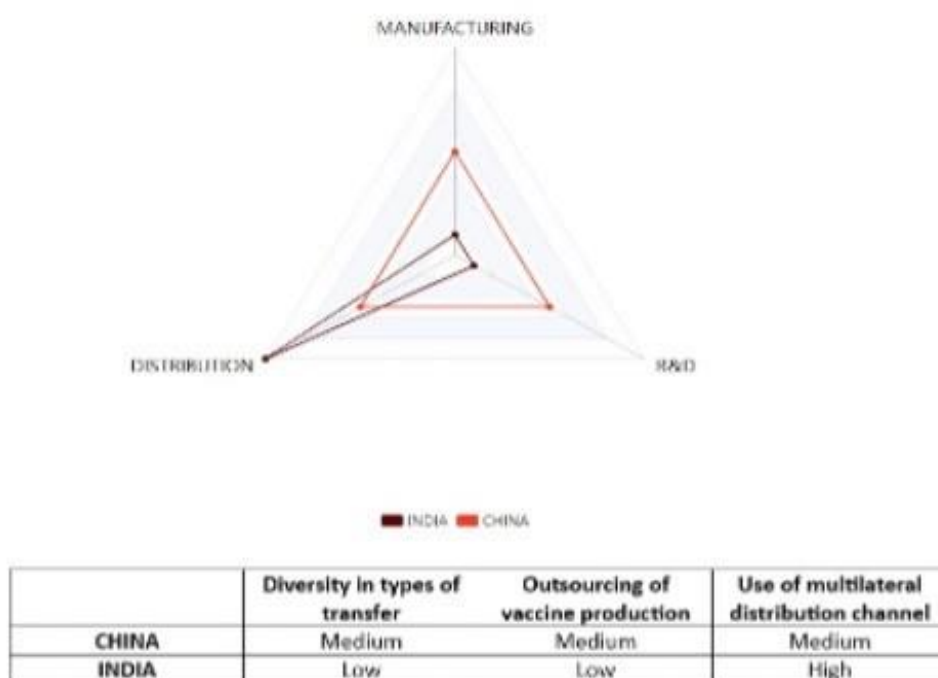
*Figure1: India Vaccine Supply 2021 (MEA India, 2021)*

India's vaccine strategy was mostly donation-based in nations like Bangladesh and Nepal, it engaged in commercial exports with relatively wealthy countries to establish close geopolitical links. Rationally, health diplomacy helps India to align with nations of its interest through strategic actions of regulating donations and commercial exports, to balance competition with China in South Asia(Waltz, 1979, p.76-77).

In the extended neighbourhood of IOR, India balanced power through cooperation with multilateral forum of US-led QUAD, seeking to counter China's expansionist motives in Sri Lanka and Maldives in rule-based international order and maritime domain with its initial aim to supply 1 billion vaccine doses in the region.

India proactively collaborated with multilateral forums like COVAX by signing deals with SII, and GAVI in supplying vaccines, being the largest supplier to multilateral distribution initiatives (Suzuki and Yang, 2023). Through this, India bolstered its reputation in multilateral cooperation, while financial cost was largely incurred by Western donors. India supported organisations like GAVI through financial aid and vaccine supply, demonstrating its solidarity towards humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in South Asia during the pandemic (MEA India, 2020). Contrarily, China undertook a commercial approach in vaccine distribution to compensate for lack of vaccine R&D capabilities which resulted in concerns over China’s vaccine efficacy.

**Covid Vaccine Strategy Comparison: China India**



**Figure 2: Relative strategy and advantage of China- India, (Suzuki and Yang, 2023)**

India’s R&D falters from China due to limited public-private collaboration, which hindered financial and global acceptance of Bharat Biotech manufactured indigenous vaccine Covaxin, and SII-AstraZeneca manufactured Covishield. In contrast, despite China’s moderate manufacturing capacity, government cooperation boosted Sinopharm’s vaccine production.

China joined the multilateral initiative COVAX late in October 2020 to distribute vaccines while pledging to buy 1% of vaccines from COVAX for domestic purposes (Kobierecka, 2022). China's foreign policy evolution in the pandemic through vaccine diplomacy enhanced space for new cooperatives, advancing its long-term regional and global agendas like the BRI. Arguably, China sought to portray itself as a responsible stakeholder to maximise power in the region. In South Asia, India reinforced NFP by emphasising vaccine donations, whereas China predominantly focused on commercial vaccine sales complemented by donations, geographically targeting South Asia and extended neighbourhood within the BRI framework. China maximised its geopolitical gains by fulfilling the vaccine supply gap when India was forced to stop vaccine supply due to insufficiency in domestic demands during the second wave of the pandemic (Menon, 2021), later India resumed vaccine exports in October 2021. Additionally, India's extensive multilateral engagement driven by its production capacity and proven efficacy led it to receive 10 million doses from COVAX because of its generous vaccine contribution and supply regionally and globally.

Despite the second wave, India did leverage its stance as the largest manufacturer in the world and *net security provider*, eliminating the need to market its vaccine independently (Yang, 2023). Critically, It can be argued that New Delhi, recognized vaccine market as oligopolistic (Balestra and Caruso, 2023) in terms of production and supply and responded through inclination towards bilateral and enhanced multilateralism to balance power by forming altruistic alliances with neighbours, enhancing its regional weight while countering Beijing's maximalist intent of being potential regional hegemon with ability to dominate a region by overpowering neighbours.

Beijing's vaccine diplomacy proved to be costliest in production, with investments in R&D and distribution, reflecting its ambition to be perceived as a global supplier. Comparatively, India seemed less ambitious in R&D, but multilateralism enabled it to gain vaccine efficacy recognition in global markets, whilst being a reliable power for neighbours. The region's behavioural response enabled India to emerge as a rising player counter-balancing Chinese influence in the region (Salvatore, 1995). Thus, Indian vaccine diplomacy was characterised as a humanitarian endeavour of providing vaccines at cost-effective rates.

## CHAPTER 5: SOFT POWER PLAY

COVID-19 evolved how nations assert influence in the geopolitical arena, vaccine diplomacy became an integral strategy in nation branding and was used as a tool for projecting soft power in South Asia further expanding power ambitions of China and India. While competing in global health diplomacy both nations align geopolitical and economic objectives with humanitarian concerns like pandemic. Vaccine diplomacy argues that altruism and national interest are mutually interdependent, nations pursue foreign policy ideals while supporting other small states (Apolinário Júnior et al., 2022).

China was villainized because of being the epicentre of the COVID-19 virus breakout, leading to a reputational rollercoaster due to poor publicity. Through its public diplomacy, Beijing enhanced global health leadership by providing masks, medical test kits and vaccines to help nations combat the non-traditional security threat of COVID. China approached bilateral means more efficiently to distribute vaccines and Chinese vaccine manufacturers built finishing plants in BRI favouring networks in South Asia starting from Pakistan, which has been strategically inclined towards China, due to antagonistic relations with India over border tensions, terrorism and the Kashmir dispute (Pattanaik, 2021). China pursued public diplomacy as a strategy for portraying its rise as a peaceful state to garner interest to enhance its geopolitical strength. From classical realism perspective, soft power play is employed as neither power nor interest can be reduced to material forms (Morgenthau et al., 2006). Thus, by increasing health aid, China forged partnerships to gain economic and geopolitical leverage to further its concept of Health Silk Road. Partnerships in South Asia, serve as a foundation for China to expand the international market share of Chinese medical products.

China's medical bilateralism, and the 2021 virtual SAARC meeting hosted without India (Ariyawardana, 2022) highlight a calculated realist stance, which is a necessary instrument to achieve interest. From a rational viewpoint, Beijing focused on South Asian neighbours as a deliberate attempt to seek regional influence through exports and donations of vaccines as



*global public good* countering New Delhi's rise. Through this, China maximises its prospect for state survival by gaining power relative to India using its diplomatic efforts (Mearsheimer, 2011). Five basic principles of peaceful coexistence, taken by Tianxia epitomise China's role of engaging in diplomacy to sustain relationships with neighbours via its trade and infrastructural efforts (Dhillon, 2023). With global health and vaccine diplomacy as a tool of soft power, China resorted to nation branding to project a positive image of the country. Nye (2021) emphasises soft power's approach as strategic and state-centric, emphasises nation-states and outcomes, befitting interest in foreign policy ideals. Substantially, China also engaged in multilateralism via regional cooperations and the COVAX facility, though it happened after prioritising bilateral distribution, in areas of regional and global interests. This underscores that China uses multilateralism as a strategic altruism tool, to advance its own interests to position itself as a reliable power.

China joining COVAX, emphasising multilateralism to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines and rejecting vaccine nationalism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China, 2021), potentially acted as a strategy for brand building in response to the negative perception against China post-the virus outbreak. China's broader motive of multilateralism as per Mearsheimer (2011) can be interpreted as a means to safeguard national interest while having the opportunity to engage in regional markets securing trade and infrastructural connections. Additionally, Beijing's stance on vaccine nationalism might be strategically deceptive as there were concerns about vaccine efficacy and data transparency. China weaponized vaccines domestically to promote regional and global outreach by relying on domestic markets to promote its vaccines before joining COVAX and other multilateral forums (Zhang and Jamali, 2022).

India was dominating vaccine diplomacy in regional South Asia and the extended neighbourhood. However, due to the second wave of the pandemic, India stumbled in vaccine supply, resulting in China offering medical and vaccine supplies in the region to elevate its presence. Despite such struggles, India maintained its reputation as a moralistic and vital player in balancing power in international politics (Malone, Mohan, Raghavan, 2015). In the first wave, India emphasised the interconnectedness of the world via its ideal of *Vasudhaiva*

*Kutumbakam*, behaviourally shaping the objectives of Indian foreign policy. Keeping in mind the use of vaccines as a bargaining tool of national interest, India stabilised this without losing sight of public welfare. The neighbourhood realised India's potential of supplying vaccines and this capability enabled India to be viewed as a *smart power* (Nye, 2009) where through its soft power capabilities, it transforms the behaviour of other states, to further deal with other problems in international politics. In the second wave, despite India struggling with domestic supply, it resumed supply to developing countries majorly by donations.

New Delhi used people-centric diplomacy to generate goodwill to mend ties with strained partners and cement friendly ties with neighbours. New Delhi centralised health security within the paradigm of national security and continued to help the neighbourhood strategically, with a dilemma about its humanitarian efforts meeting the end. To balance power, India undertook bilateral and multilateral measures in the beginning via regional cooperations, highlighting that states interact with small states not only to maximise power but rather to maintain power within the regional-international realm of politics (Waltz, 1979, p 124-126).

India relied mostly on multilateral geopolitics with organisations like SAARC and QUAD and its participation in COVAX facility with claims about ending vaccine apartheid as nations due to insecurity over influence, supplied vaccines to areas of geostrategic interest creating inequality (MEA India, 2023). However, it can be inferred that India benefited from regional and global alliances by prioritising its neighbours, fostering result-oriented outcomes through multilateralism. India maintained and mended relations with Maldives, Bangladesh as they were pro-India on issues like the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan, further supporting the Indian stance in international forums.

Through the *Vaccine Maitri* program, India rationally displayed *soft power signalling*, where vaccines were packaged in white boxes carrying the flag of India and the host country, which helped to shape long-term public opinion of the regional community towards India. Following this Indian Navy and Air Force substantially helped to deliver vaccines, depicting use of armed force for purely humanitarian purposes (Singh et al., 2023b). India primarily assisted in the

IOR region including Maldives and Sri Lanka to prevent Chinese expansion through BRI. This highlights Indian commitment towards political and economic stability while considering its imperative of strategic autonomy as remarked by EAM Dr. S Jaishankar (MEA India, 2023). Tactical reinforcing of pharmaceutical and market supply capabilities, allowed India to be the first responder during the crisis, enhancing its reputation as a regional power.

Despite China-India tussle in vaccine diplomacy, India leveraged its capabilities to garner support to limit China's presence in regional South Asia for future associations.

Contemporarily, Maldives had strained ties with India, due to growing inclination towards China, however, it re-evaluated India's pandemic aid, through medical and economic assistance. President Muizzu managed to restore India-Maldives ties considering it as the "closest ally", breaking the tradition of approaching *Beijing first* and signing several pacts with China including defence cooperation agreement which could entrap India limiting its influence in South Asia and extended neighbourhood of IOR. Maldives, thanked India for its continued economic aid fostering future free trade agreements (Ghoshal, 2024). India provided Sri Lanka with emergency economic assistance during the pandemic when it faced an unprecedented forex crisis on the backdrop of India's security-related concerns vis-a-vis China (Moorthy, 2024).

Similarly in Bangladesh, despite strains in New Delhi- Dhaka relations following Sheikh Hasina's overthrow, the new government cannot sever ties with India as it would lead to immediate decline in exports, faltering its economy due to exacerbating inflation and GDP.

Bangladesh remains compelled to acknowledge India's diplomatic manoeuvring during COVID and prior, further opting for neutrality to restore balance of power in the region. From a neorealist perspective, while vaccine diplomacy is not the sole determinant of hard power outcomes (Nye, 2009b), India's attempt at soft power diplomacy leveraged its stance to further its own interest bolstering public imagery as a key regional player, limiting pro-China influence in south Asia. (Khan and Tarin, 2024).

Thus, India has been more correct than consistent in enhancing its diplomatic capabilities against China by reforming multilateralism through efforts like SAARC emergency fund, enabling cooperation among nations in South Asia. The NFP enshrines India's regional priority,

projecting its humanitarian assistance whilst enhancing bilateral partnerships to strengthen future relations. States need to continuously maintain balancing behaviour in South Asia, when balance appears to be disrupted, as in the longer run it shall help India, small states, and multilateral forums like QUAD to restore balance, preventing South Asia from turning into a Chinese subcontinent (Waltz, 1979).

## CONCLUSION:

Ever since WHO announced the global pandemic on 11 March 2020, nations started to indulge in the development of vaccines and enhanced supply of medicines and medical equipment for domestic and international purposes. Roll out of vaccine during the pandemic, initiated vaccine diplomacy giving it a strategic dimension instead of being purely altruistic. This research examines Sino-Indian initiatives during the pandemic, which contributed to strategic rivalry for regional hegemony in South Asia, the dissertation furthermore supports the hypothesis that India's initiative, in vaccine and health diplomacy, leveraged its capabilities to limit Chinese presence in the region in the long term via its enhanced multilateralism and differed diplomatic operationalization.

**Geopolitically**, India rises to the China challenge through its NFP and vaccine Maitri demonstrating a collaborative and multilateral approach, emphasising humanitarian assistance to balance power in the region, positioning itself as a reliable regional partner. Contrarily, China engaged in bilateral distribution of vaccines, highlighting its global ambition, illustrated by the BRI and economic expansion. Diplomatic tactics like wolf warrior and debt trap diplomacy enshrine China's interest in fulfilling long-term intentions regarding technology, investments and infrastructure. Furthermore, this research also facilitates that India's self-reliant policy push was effective in enforcing its stance as net security provider in South Asia and extended region of IOR, enhancing its health infrastructural capabilities which provided strong reputational boost from neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives. These nations reciprocated during India's second wave, when it faced a shortage of medical equipment, strengthening soft power relations to necessitate further cooperation, supporting India's neorealist perspective

From an **economic perspective**, China focused more on commercial exports of vaccines complemented by donations, highlighting China's intent to acquire a foothold in regional markets to maximise its supply chain. China bilaterally pursued vaccine diplomacy to gain geopolitical recognition in terms of vaccine R&D and distribution, however it faltered in competition with India because of its donation-based vaccine supply with higher efficacy. India collaborated with COVAX and GAVI, demonstrating solidarity with regional neighbours in

combatting the pandemic. India's cost-effective medicines and vaccines and vaccine data transparency leveraged its capabilities as a credible regional leader.

China-India used vaccines, to engage in **soft power play**, advancing nation branding to capitalise on new opportunities amongst neighbours. India's vaccine diplomacy was based on its civilization ethos of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*", inculcating its responsibility towards problems in regional and global realms. Under this, New Delhi supplied vaccines, medical equipment and life lifesaving medicines to the region, justifying that the soft power, civilizational salience also complements economic and military quotients. In contrast, China's effort was viewed with skepticism due to its foreign policy ideals of national growth and security through expansionist intentions. Thus, vaccine diplomacy served as a strategic altruistic tool for China to enhance commercial growth and reputation.

Enhancement in diplomatic capabilities positions India as a rising power yet constrained power due to its consistent efforts to balance its interests for advancement in economic and geopolitical security concerns. Henceforth, with components like vaccine diplomacy, longterm implications for regional hegemony remain to be seen in the post-pandemic era as Sino-India continue to navigate the complex political landscape of South Asia

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