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*Global Health Security
COVID-19 & Its Impact*

India's Vaccine Ambition: How Far Can It Go?

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SYNOPSIS

Battling the devastating second wave of COVID-19, India sought urgent help from the distant US even though China expressed neighbourly support. Delhi is seeking 'vaccine partnership' with the US and a new template of globalisation as an economic alternative to China's dominance of supply chains. The unsettled China-India relationship also appears to influence Delhi's thinking.

COMMENTARY

ON 12 JUNE 2021, India urged the Group of Seven (G7) industrialised countries to promote free trade in vaccine-related and other technologies being developed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. At the World Trade Organisation (WTO), India and South Africa had earlier proposed a waiver of the relevant intellectual property rights (IPR).

Such an IPR waiver might enable competent countries to produce qualitative COVID-19 vaccines, enlarging the global base for COVID-19 relief. This could arguably be the first step towards a new globalisation template. Following a US-led tele-conference among seven Indo-Pacific countries in May 2020, India had said all those seven states "underlined the need for a new template of globalisation" to overcome COVID-19.

Why the Push for a New Globalisation Template

The crux of the reported Indo-Pacific consensus in 2020 calling for a new globalisation template was to reduce the world's reliance on the perceived Chinese monopoly over

numerous industrial and other supply chains. Delhi therefore expects the US to become a source of critical help to roll back the pandemic's second wave in India in 2021.

Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Washington in May 2021, seeking to forge a US-India vaccine partnership. Responding on 3 June, America announced that it would supply its COVID-19 vaccines to India under President Joe Biden's "Strategy for Global Vaccine Sharing".

China responded by matching this. The Chinese ambassador to India, Sun Weidong portrayed on 8 June how his country was second to none in helping India fight the pandemic. Tapping the Chinese economy for this purpose "fully shows that the industrial and supply chains with China's participation are highly effective and reliable", he emphasised.

Sun's apparent aim was to counter the idea of a multi-national network of resilient supply chains as an alternative to those already radiating from China. But, in India's view, the real issue is the lack of political trust when it comes to China, given Beijing's growing control over a wide range of supply chains.

Delicate Situation

In light of Delhi's concerns, Chinese President Xi Jinping messaged Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 30 April that the "human race belongs to a community with a shared future". On that basis Xi offered Modi "support and help" to fight the pandemic's second wave.

Xi's intention was to show that his offer was not a cosmetic conciliatory gesture amidst the ongoing Sino-Indian military standoff. Xi made the offer despite Beijing's "concern and regret" over the recent exclusion of Chinese telecom majors from India's trials for its rollout of 5G knowhow and equipment.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi telephoned his Indian counterpart Jaishankar to detail the help being offered to battle COVID-19. When Jaishankar raised the concerns of Indian entities which were already buying COVID-19 relief materials from China, Wang Yi assured "facilitation" of customs clearances and shipping logistics.

However, with the unresolved year-long military crisis overshadowing, the pricing for Indian purchases of Chinese COVID-19 relief materials took on contentious overtones. Delhi began evaluating the risks of its over-dependence on China.

By mid-May, Beijing's response was that the pricing was determined by market forces and China itself had to pay high prices while fighting COVID-19 in its initial stage. For good measure, Beijing emphasised the Chinese supplies of essential raw materials for vaccine production in India over time.

A Pharma Factory of the World?

India is a key pharmaceutical factory of the world, including as a producer of generic vaccines. But the scale of China's current production of COVID-19 vaccines is a new

factor of relevance to India in the global pharmaceutical sector. Competitively, India has begun to seek assured supplies of raw materials from the US for the production of COVID-19 vaccines for domestic and global use.

Some of these raw materials can be used in both civil and military sectors, making it a sensitive matter. This was evident in the Pentagon's brief non-committal statement on US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's talks with Jaishankar in May. They "discussed opportunities to deepen coordination amid the resurgence of COVID-19 cases [in India]". No details were given.

But Delhi needs a sustained supply of US-origin raw materials for COVID-19 vaccine production because Indian requirements to fight the pandemic have soared. Furthermore, severely affected internationally is Modi's "Vaccine *Maitri*" (vaccine-borne friendship) programme of humanitarian and commercial exports.

Indo-Pacific Hub for Vaccine Production?

Already identified as a potential Indo-Pacific hub for COVID-19 vaccine production, India's hope of becoming an exemplary major power depends on this niche role among other factors. On 12 March, the role was assigned to India at an online summit of the Quad – a security forum comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia.

Under the plan, qualitative COVID-19 vaccine, based on American technologies, would be manufactured in India. Financial resources for the production and distribution in the Indo-Pacific region were also identified.

For the Quad initiative to become fully operational, a substantive US-India vaccine partnership and a waiver of the relevant IPR would be essential. Separately, India seeks to compete with China, two of whose COVID-19 vaccines have received emergency-use listing by the World Health Organisation (WHO). A made-by-India COVID-19 vaccine is said to be awaiting WHO's approval.

On balance, while accepting support from the increasingly Sino-sceptic US and G7, India runs the risk of a recessed dream of becoming a global player by its own efforts. It should control and roll back the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and stabilise relations with China to stay relevant to the wider world.

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