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Gulf Studies Center

**Covid-19 in the Gulf
Special Coverage**

**India's Vaccine-diplomacy with the GCC
Lakshmi Venugopal Menon and Thomas Bonnie James**

**Gulf Insights Series
N° 44 – May 2021**

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Introduction

The Covid-19 vaccine has become a new currency of international diplomacy. Countries that possess the know-how and production capacity have identified the vaccine as a soft power tool that can secure diplomatic support or thaw frosty bilateral ties. Russia, China and India are pioneering in this realization.

India's attempt at Vaccine Diplomacy

India, the world's [third-largest producer of pharmaceuticals](#), launched the Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative in January 2021. A key diplomatic effort to supply made-in-India vaccines to low-income and developing countries universally.

India has been verbal about its assurance to assist global recovery efforts and was [one of the first nations to supply food, medicines and essential supplies to countries in South Asia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific](#). At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed commitment to ensure that [India's vaccine production and delivery capacity is available to "humanity"](#) as it contends the virus. On 16 January 2021, India began rolling-out its domestic Covid-19 vaccine, both the indigenously developed inoculation from Bharat Biotech International Ltd and Serum's Covishield. The latter is ["the Indian version of the replication-deficient adenoviral vector vaccine developed"](#) by AstraZeneca and Oxford University. During the World Economic Forum, India expressed readiness and intent to export Indian-produced vaccines. On 22 January, the country began exporting vaccines to six neighboring

countries –Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar and Seychelles. India began commercial shipments of the vaccines to Brazil, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and South Africa in late January. Indian-made vaccines, compared to their counterparts, are considered to be [cost-effective](#) and do not require to be stored and transported at subzero temperatures.

On 18 March, while responding to a question in the Parliament on the "Distribution of Covid-19 Vaccine in Foreign Countries", the Ministry of External Affairs Minister V. Muraleedharan said, "External supplies are done factoring in domestic production, requirements of the national vaccination program and requests for the 'Made in India' vaccines. These supplies will continue in the weeks and months ahead, in a phased manner, depending on production and needs of the national vaccination program." Mr. Muraleedharan also stated that India was sending these vaccines abroad in the "form of grant, commercial sales of manufacturers GAVI's COVAX facility".

As of 9 May, India has provided [66.3 million vaccine doses](#) to 95 countries through various modalities including grants, aid and gifts. India's vaccine diplomacy arrived at a time of growing apprehensions over 'vaccine nationalism' and the increasing inequity in vaccine supply. The [WHO, criticizing numerous developed countries](#) such as the United States of America for [amassing vaccines](#) and creating a shortage in its supply, lauded India's efforts. Praising India's efforts, the World Health Organization's Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had issued a [statement](#) saying, "Thank you, India & Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for your continued support to global COVID-19

response. Only if we act together, including sharing of knowledge, can we stop this virus and save lives and livelihoods.”

India had taken the decision to share its existing vaccine supplies, whereas many nations have opted for the nationalist choice of hindering exports. Additionally, India has [offered](#) 1.1 billion vaccine doses to the WHO’s COVAX program to dispense COVID-19 vaccines to economically weaker nations. Meanwhile, in the scramble for coronavirus vaccines, several nations are approaching India to reduce accessibility and availability apertures.

The GCC Link

The MENA countries can be categorized based on their position and agency in the emerging vaccine diplomacy field and its interaction with previous political trends. First, leaders attempting regional vaccine diplomacy – the UAE, Israel, Morocco and Turkey. Second, nations with less expertise – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria. Last, states that have been unsuccessful in launching effective vaccination campaigns due to structural issues, political instability and financial shortfalls – Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Iraq. This is crucial in understanding the vaccine diplomacy scramble by Russia, China, India and the European Union in the region.

The GCC is a unique migratory destination for Indians, and correspondingly India is a vital country for human resources to the region. As of 2018, there [were](#) 8.9 million Indian migrants in the Gulf. Of them, 3.31 million were in the UAE, 2.27 million in Saudi Arabia, 1.16 million in Kuwait, 1.2 million in Oman, 0.4 million in Bahrain and 0.7 million in Qatar. India also shares close economic, historical and cultural ties with the region.

Approximately 8.4 per cent of India’s vaccine export has been directed to the GCC. As of the 5th of May 2021, India has exported a [total](#) of 5.1 million doses of vaccine to the GCC countries. Saudi Arabia has received the lion’s share (4.5 million doses) – 88 per cent of the total Indian vaccines received by the GCC, an indicator of strong bilateral ties. UAE and Kuwait received 0.2 million doses each. Meanwhile, Bahrain and Oman received 0.1 million doses each. Bahrain’s Prime Minister and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa thanked PM Modi “and our friends in India for working with us to secure the delivery of” the vaccine, through a Twitter post. Notably, according to Indian and Qatari official sources, Qatar is the only GCC state that has not officially received any direct shipment of vaccines from India. The source of the Covishield used in Qatar has not been made public, however, it could have been acquired via certain African states.

The argument that New Delhi’s vaccine diplomacy has worked in the GCC is plausible. India is currently mired in the second-wave of the pandemic. The new, highly-proliferous triple-mutant Covid-19 variant in India is crippling the government and its systems. Amidst the crisis, the GCC is rushing to provide emergency aid to the country. The Saudi government has [sent](#) 80 metric tons of liquid oxygen. Qatar has [sent](#) approximately 300 tons of medical supplies from around the world to support COVID-19 relief efforts. Qatar Airways is committed to delivering aid supplies to India free of charge. The United Arab Emirates has sent a [consignment](#) of Covid relief material including 157 ventilators, 480 BiPAPs, and other medical supplies to India. Bahrain has [sent](#) a shipment of 40 MT of liquid oxygen. Kuwait has [provided](#) 282 oxygen cylinders, 60

oxygen concentrators to India. Every GCC state apart from Oman has already sent immediate aid to India. This may be an indication that India's attempt at vaccine diplomacy has been successful to a certain extent amongst the GCC states.

The Benefits of Vaccine Diplomacy for India

A core and foundational principle of Indian foreign policy is *Vasudeva Katumbakam*, or the 'world as one family'. The nation's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, set the foundations of India's science and technology infrastructure, with the notion to portray the nation's noble, humanist, and universalist intentions. Collaboration and joint benefit are fundamental tenets of India's foreign policy. The pandemic has provided India with an opportunity to demonstrate these principles, validating that it has the credibility, proficiency and competence to create significant contributions to the global stage.

Nevertheless, India's vaccine diplomacy is not merely altruistic. India's vaccine diplomacy aims to further the republic's ambitions to be acknowledged as a global power. It functions as an effectual instrument and mechanism of India's soft-power that bolsters and expands India's relations with its neighbors and the Indo-Pacific.

The goodwill earned through vaccine diplomacy could pay diplomatic dividends in the future. For years, India has lobbied for a UN Security Council seat. India's vaccine diplomacy may translate into critical votes as India is scheduled to host the 2023 G20 summit and has secured a [non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council](#). New Delhi's decision must also be appraised in the context of its increased geopolitical animosity with its neighbor China. India is attempting to surpass China's string

of pearls strategy in South Asia. During the India-China border dispute in 2020, PM Modi has emphasized India's need to play a critical role in global value chains. India's show of strength in the global vaccine race expresses this sentiment. The leaders' summit of QUAD, an alliance by the US, Japan, Australia and India that aims to contain or offset Chinese influence in the Indian ocean, agreed India would lead Johnson & Johnson's vaccine's production; a [new vaccine initiative by QUAD](#). China pushing its Sinovac vaccine through [preferential visa regulations](#) may be a reaction to the developments at the Quad summit.

Apart from diplomatic acumen, India's vaccine diplomacy also encourages bilateral and multi-lateral knowledge-sharing and cooperation with pharmaceutical and pharmaceutical giants. This will in turn [increase](#) people-to-people and firm-to-firm transnational bonding.

The Peril of India's Vaccine Diplomacy

Bureaucratic inefficiencies and policy-paralysis are becoming apparent. Recently, the [Washington Post](#) asked rhetorically "Can India, population 1.3 billion, be isolated?" Indian domestic media houses have been decrying failure of the government. Author and activist [Arundhati Roy](#) has called the government's inaction and shortcomings a crime against humanity.

Despite being a producer of Covid-19 vaccines, the country is facing a terrible shortage of the same. The hidden market for oxygen cylinders is booming in India. Some hospitals have even started bring-your-own-oxygen schemes. Dead bodies are piling up on pyres, cremation grounds are conducting mass funerals and working beyond capacities. Simply put, India's pandemic catastrophe is unfolding –

oxygen shortages, ICU bed shortages, bureaucratic chaos and longer newspaper obituaries are becoming commonplace.

In 2020, PM Modi vowed India's vaccine manufacturing and delivery capacity. However, this is where the fault lies. India did not unlock its full capacity to produce vaccines. Policy paralysis is the problem. In other words, the refusal or failure to act, or acting too late. With a monthly need of 150-200 million doses domestically, India's current vaccine production capacity is insufficient. However, almost nothing was done to enhance production. Advanced government funding was stalled. While the domestic vaccines were exported, no vaccines were booked from other producers until late January 2021. India had ordered 16 million doses, which is far too little and far too late. In comparison, the United States had ordered 400 million doses in August 2020 and the EU ordered 800 million doses in November 2020. According to the [Indian Express](#), the Indian-origin double mutant coronavirus variant (B.1.167), believed to be the cause of the second surge, was identified on 5 October 2020, yet no action was taken until January 2021.

Conclusion

Initially it could be argued that India managed to cater to its domestic demand for vaccines and provide international assistance. Nonetheless, India's present domestic situation paints a different picture. As of 21st April, India has over 250,000 people dead, over 20 million active cases and 300,000 new cases every day. Meanwhile, the Serum Institute of India (SII) has [announced](#) an indeterminate delay in shipping vaccines that have already been purchased.

While India is able to [produce](#) approximately 90 million vaccines a

month (as of 9th May), the country has only vaccinated [over 170 million](#) of its domestic population; [less](#) than 12 percent of its total population. However, only close to 30 million people have received both doses of the vaccine. It can be argued that India's vaccination diplomacy was at the expense of its citizens. All GCC states that had acquired vaccines from India have vaccinated more percentage of its respective populations than India has so far which lead to domestic audience calling India's vaccine diplomacy PM Modi's [showmanship](#).

The crippling second wave and SII's failure to deliver are hurdles in India's vaccine diplomacy. However, vaccine diplomacy as a global soft power tool has only begun to unfold. Hence, it is too early to write the obituary of India's vaccine diplomacy attempt.

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