

# Health Diplomacy in Post Covid -19 World: India's Soft Power Option

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Diplomacy, the art and science of furthering one's national interest through tact and perseverance, has found its way back into national agendas in recent years. As the number of problems without borders increases, so does the need for cooperation and diplomacy. Climate change, terrorism and migration have all been problems that cannot be resolved with hard power. The soft power aspects of statecraft have become all the more important. Soft power and diplomacy have the potential to convert the challenges of the pandemic into opportunities. During the time of the pandemic, India, popularly known as the world's pharmacy hub, provided health assistance to various countries. In this context, this article explores the strategic benefits that the Government of India can achieve by leveraging and materializing the opportunities provided by health diplomacy at the international level through the prism of soft power.

**Keywords:** India, Health Diplomacy, soft power, COVID-19, Pandemics

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Health is central and core to the happiness and well-being of individuals. Traditionally health was approached by the state from the welfare and humanitarian perspective. In the post-pandemic world, a paradigm shift is taking place in the way health is approached and conceptualised by the states in the modern world. Nation states are exploring the potentiality of power and diplomacy in the health sector as well. States have moved 'health' from the auxiliary concept of diplomacy to the core concept of diplomacy. Statecraft now needs to look at not only the hard power of the military but also the soft power of multilateralism, cooperation, and innovation. Countries have to cooperate to fight the pandemic together as the virus does not stop at one's border. The development and distribution of vaccines to combat the virus, building healthcare facilities in developing countries and aid to boost the economy after the recession all need cooperation and collaboration among the states. The states will also look at maximizing their interests at the same time which certainly will boost competition among the states. Developing partnerships under these conditions need the finesse of diplomacy and soft power tools.

Covid 19 pandemic had a serious impact on bilateral and multilateral relations in global politics. Many countries tried to check and evade the consequences of Covid 19 by depending upon global health diplomacy. Like others, India also pushed its best to leverage the opportunities of health diplomacy in order to prevent the adverse

consequences of Covid 19. India, by being the pioneer in developing the vaccine, decided to help and support other countries by providing vaccines, medical supplies and practitioners. In this context, this article explores the strategic benefits that the Government of India can achieve by leveraging and materializing the opportunities provided by health diplomacy at the international level through the prism of soft power.

### **Soft Power and Health Diplomacy**

As conceived by Joseph Nye in the 1980s, the term 'soft power', is a type of power used by the state to acquire dominance over other states apart from the means of war and monetary payments (Nye, 2004). He proposed that the states can get the desired outcomes in international relations even without waging war or making lucrative payments. Other countries may tend to compromise or offer deals by getting attracted to the actions of a country. Soft power has the secret potential to shape and modify the interests and preferences of others. Nye tried to establish that the soft power utilised by the states is the advanced and bigger version of soft power that is employed at the individual and personal levels. He dictated the presence of soft power in marriage, human relationships, organisations etc. A state can bring other states closer to it by tuning its agenda, foreign policy, domestic activities, ideologies, governance, culture, diaspora, economy, political system, charisma, value and other tangible and intangible attributes in such a way that it attracts them. In a psychological and behavioural sense, soft power consists of the emotional quotients of enticing and attracting. In the post-COVID world, soft power stands as the best option for the states as opposed to the traditional hard power as the economies of most of the countries have been battered. As the states begin to turn their attention back to rebuilding their economies still reeling under the effects of the pandemic, there are very few tools for the states to use to influence other nations. Health diplomacy is one such tool that most developed countries have begun to use as the race to develop the vaccine and cure for pandemics heats up. Vaccine nationalism is the new sensational word for the officials and the media, who are warning states from making this the race for absolute gains over other countries.

If the Securitisation theory of Barry Buzan is used in this context by marking an 'epidemic like Covid-19 down as a national security threat (an existential threat), it becomes easier for the governments to arm themselves with extraordinary means, mobilize their full administrative machinery and commit/optimize resources to prevent the development of the threat' (Acharya, 2020). With the same framework, one can also argue that this non-traditional security threat also needs diplomatic means to manage national interests. Health diplomacy thus becomes an important tool for countries like India, which can actually bring about a moderate tone to this race to manage the pandemic.

### **Health Diplomacy as a Tool of Foreign Policy**

The art of diplomacy has multiple dimensions and one among them is health diplomacy. 'Health diplomacy is not a concept of recent origin, but its usage and implications have changed over the decades (Youde, 2010). Historically, international cooperation and partnership to safeguard the individual and state's interests have been the core of health diplomacy. Rather than a tool of dominance and influence, health diplomacy was used as a means to prevent trade and commercial

disruptions resulting from pandemics. When pandemics of cholera and plague erupted, as part of quarantine measures and closure of ports, the movement of people, goods and services was impeded. American plagues in the 16th century, the London plague in the 17th century, the Russian plague of the 18th century, the cholera outbreak of the 19th century, the Spanish flu of the 20th century, and COVID-19 of the 21st century are some classic cases of pandemics that had shaken the world with lockdown and quarantine disrupting movement of people and goods. In 1851, physicians and diplomats from European countries came together in Paris at the first International Sanitary Conference. The agenda for the conference was to streamline and improve the cross-country quarantine policy that would check the spread of pandemics as well as prevent the disruption of trade. Even though concrete output did not come out of the conference, it led to the establishment of International Sanitary Conventions, which act as the precursor for modern-day international health diplomacy (Markel, 2004). In the subsequent decades, the world witnessed the establishment of many international health institutions like the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) in 1902, the League of Nations Health Organisation in 1924 and finally the World Health Organisation in 1948 (Rebecca Katz, 2011).

In due course of time, health diplomacy evolved and turned out to be a form of diplomacy by which states attract other countries or influence their foreign policies. When medical aid and care are carefully and smartly offered and applied, it can bring a complimentary attitude from other states. This can also help in reiterating and strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations in the international sphere. This can also act as a means for regional and global security. It can be operated individually by countries or by a group of countries. Due to its inherent characteristics and method of operation in modern times, health diplomacy can also be pooled into Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. The diplomacy of medicine can achieve dual goals of influencing the beneficiary's foreign policy and health standards. Besides building goodwill among the minds of the population, donor states can access the policies and decisions of the beneficiary state.

In 2020, the world witnessed the spread of COVID-19 spread by SARS-CoV- 2. It has ravaged humanity by infecting millions of people worldwide. This virus spreads from person to person quickly. The coronavirus outbreak became known to the world in December when China informed the World Health Organisation of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause in Wuhan City in Hubei Province. Later on, on 11 March 2020, WHO declared Covid-19 as a pandemic. Different countries have used a variety of tactics to manage the pandemic and keep their economies afloat. Countries have also used the opportunity to negotiate agreements that in the pre-pandemic era, were not reaching the agreement stage. Some countries like China seem to be using this period to become more assertive in their territorial claims, and others have tried to distract their citizenry with so-called achievements in external affairs. While the pandemic affected international travel, trade and interaction of people, technology has helped in continuing diplomacy and international engagements both at the state and international organisational levels. Once the countries realised that international engagements could also be image boosters for the ruling governments, they became much more common than before. Health Diplomacy thus gained importance through this virtual mode. India can use this opportunity to make significant progress in using its human capital as a soft power tool, especially with health diplomacy.

Speaking about India's health care assets at a University, the Indian Foreign Secretary said, 'We need to work together to leverage this asset. If we continue to grow, invest, innovate, benchmark ourselves against the best in the world and work hard, we will become a healthcare power in the years and decades to come' (Print, 2020). The assets that he was referring to are the scientific community, the pharmaceutical industry and trained healthcare workers. This does give India an advantage in the region and around the world to use health diplomacy to assert itself in various ways. It can be used in multilateral settings to further the cause it has been fighting for in the World Trade Organisation: generic and affordable medicines and vaccines and bilaterally to further boost the healthcare industry. Of course, India will first have to improve its own healthcare system and manage the pandemic to look like a responsible power that can use its resources wisely. Health Diplomacy also gives several other strategic advantages such as creating a symbolic capital, boosting the image as a pharmacy of the world, and a responsible regional power that will cooperate in times of emergency. This is also a tool to improve its standing in the multilateral forums and get a boost in bilateral relations.

### **Symbolic Capital**

India's generous attitude with regard to medical supplies during the early days of the pandemic has positively contributed to creating goodwill for India's bilateral relations and strengthening its position and support in the multilateral forums. This has also opened the gateways of symbolic capital to India. This symbolic capital would give India goodwill, prestige, influence, credit and power at the bilateral and multilateral forums. The symbolic capital for a state does not come free of cost. The state requires a certain amount of investment in trade, aid and credit at bilateral and multilateral levels. In Covid times, this investment could be medical equipment, practitioners and funds. Since India has successfully invested time and money in supplying medicines and medical practitioners (Laskar, 2020), India may taste the benefit of resultant symbolic capital. India has delivered medicines as gifts to developing countries and commercial exports to those who could afford to buy them. Essential supplies and medicines have been delivered to 17 countries in its extended neighbourhood, in the Indian Ocean, West Asia, Central Asia and South America. Humanitarian aid supplies have also been delivered to several countries in Africa. Uganda, Zambia, Niger, Eswatini, Chad, Mali, the Republic of Congo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe have received or are in the process of receiving humanitarian supplies. Countries in Latin America have also received special attention, with total of 28 countries in this region receiving medical supplies from India either as humanitarian assistance or on the basis of commercial contracts. Special consideration has been given to partner nations from the region, which include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico. In a statement on 24 March 2020, the High Representative of the European Union Josep Borrell highlighted the existence of a 'global battle of narratives and particularly 'a struggle for influence through spinning and the politics of generosity'. The recognition of this factor suggests that the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic is not just about saving lives and economies but also about building post-COVID-19 narratives that are already being created and fuelled during the pandemic (Valenza, 2020).

### **Pharmacy of World**

India has gained the reputation of being the Pharmacy of the world ever since it supplied low-cost, generic AIDs prevention drugs to African countries. Currently, it is the third-largest pharmaceutical exporter in the world (manufacturers, 2020). Indian pharma companies are known for reverse engineering several medicines to produce low-cost generic drugs. By looking at the kind of vast impact that COVID-19 has on various areas of life, it is obvious that the post-covid world will have drastic reshaping and restructuring in the global political and economic institutions. To be more specific, the global health sector and its associated institutions and components will have far-reaching changes with regard to its aims, roles, operational strategy and performance. The pandemic shall redesign the priorities and commitments of the global health sector. Health security might acquire more importance in all countries. Financially well-off countries will have to assist the under-developed economies in ensuring health security for their citizens following the strategy of 'prevention is better than cure'. Since pandemics' after-effects do not get restricted to the territorial boundaries of certain countries, it becomes a compulsion for developed countries to aid and support poor countries to ensure the health security of their citizens.

India has struggled to cope with the infection rates after it ended the lockdown. However, the low death rate has helped India to lift the lockdown and somewhat manage the pandemic. The vaccine and hydroxychloroquine controversies have led to the questioning of the scientific community in addressing the issue of COVID-19. However, India's pharmaceutical industries can jump into the post-covid markets using the spur provided by the Government of India's health diplomacy. Due to cheaper pricing and manufacturing cost, Indian drugs are in high demand in developing and underdeveloped countries (IBEF, 2020). UNICEF, UNITAID and International NGOs use India's generic medicine for affordable treatment practices in African and Latin American countries (Borders, 2010). Since Indian pharma companies have already created a market for themselves in the developing world, they can get into vaccine manufacturing and distribution in these markets. The Indian pharmaceutical sector can also play a significant role in balancing the supply chain of medicines at the global level. The government can make more investments to fund and stimulate more R&D in the pharmaceutical sector and create a platform for public private partnerships to do cutting-edge research in the pharmaceutical sector. Vaccine development is also heavily encouraged in the country as its development is of utmost priority for India with the sheer number of vaccines needed for its population. The private enterprises engaged in manufacturing the medicines can be streamlined and incentivised to boost up production resulting in export. The market needed for selling the enhanced production can be secured through the government's health diplomacy.

Attracting more foreigners to avail the benefit of affordable and quality medicine in the secondary and tertiary health sector through the promotion of medical tourism is another way by which India has increased its reputation and demand in the global health sector. The image of a reliable and supportive country that was created as a result of health diplomacy associated with covid can provide an impetus for the same. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 'the medical tourism space was valued at around \$3 billion (US\$) in 2015 and at \$9 billion in 2020' (Tourism, 2020). By making systematic and market-oriented changes in the

visa policy and developing of tourist-friendly health infrastructure, India can leverage the mileage provided in the health sector through medical diplomacy during COVID19. The Government of India would have to promote the manufacturing of the crucial medical equipment necessary during pandemics, such as diagnostic kits and personal protection kits. By increasing production, the government can not only cut short the import of the same but also can earn income through its export. This can also aid and assist Indian diplomats while negotiating and drafting humanitarian medical interventions as part of health diplomacy during pandemics. By health diplomacy, supplemented by domestic and international trade policy, India can continue to become the pharmacy of not only the developing world but also the rest.

### **Image of Reliable and Responsible Global Power**

The health diplomacy initiated by India's government during one of the worst pandemics in recent decades is enabling and equipping India to reiterate its position in the global arena as a reliable and responsible international power. India's neighbouring countries are getting shipments of paracetamol, and Hydroxychloroquine and the Indian government has also lifted the ban of the export of COVID-19 drugs to countries such as the United States of America, Spain, Brazil, Germany and the United Kingdom. The heads of beneficiary states have acknowledged and praised India's timely and generous support. This would also pave the way for India's stronger bilateral relations with these countries in the future. India is also standing at the top of the list when it comes to the initiatives taken among the SAARC and G-20 countries with regard to initiating and implementing measures to check the spread of pandemics. India is proactive in managing the crisis, evacuating its anguished people, and facilitating stranded foreign nationals' evacuation in India.

India has been a partner in the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) through which it is assured of the COVID vaccine for 20 per cent of its population. By not giving in to Vaccine nationalism, it can show that it is responsible and committed to global response through cooperation. While addressing the Global Vaccine Summit in June 2020, Prime Minister Modi said that India's support of GAVI is not only financial but that India's colossal demand also brings down the global price of vaccines for all. India has pledged 15 million US dollars to GAVI (Affairs, 2020).

### **Resuscitating Reforms in International Organisations**

The year 2020 goes through significant disruption caused by the socio, economic and political impacts of COVID-19. The unprecedented global health crisis by COVID19 has ignited exceptional tides of global cooperation and multilateralism as it is not possible for one or a group of few countries to contain the spread of the pandemic. International organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO) are expected to come up with practical solutions to control and stop the spread of COVID-19. But unfortunately, international organisations are underperforming or are under-utilised on account of lack of funds, lack of institutional policies, lack of human medical resources and lack of global initiatives and coordination. The responsibilities vested with WHO are not at par with its power. Due to this it cannot bind or dictate to the member countries to follow its guidelines. With a meagre operational budget, most of which comes from the US, WHO finds it difficult to generously fund the pandemic management measures. Its coordinating authority

and institutional setup are not strong enough to overcome the challenges put forward by COVID- 19 (Buranyi, 2020). In tune with this, India made a strong case for reforms in the recently held G-20 video conference on COVID-19. The Prime Minister of India called for measures and policies to strengthen and reform the functioning of WHO in order to check the challenges posed by the pandemic (Parashar, 2020).

The developing countries get a loan from the World Bank to create capital and reduce poverty. The International Monetary Fund provides aid and support to its member countries during crisis situations by encouraging trading and boosting economic growth and financial stability. Despite its laudable operational goals and objectives, the IMF and World Bank face criticism for how they are governed. The majority share of voting power regarding making decisions is vested with a small group of developed countries. The Bretton Woods Institutions failed to recognise the quantum of economic outcomes in underdeveloped and developing countries. Despite housing, the majority of the world's population and high international reserves, developing countries and transitional economies are sidelined in the decision-making process. This also questions the authenticity of the multilateral representation of the IMF and World Bank (Ocampo, 2005). COVID-19 has put forward a great challenge in front of the IMF and the World Bank. India has been vocal about the reformation of the governance of the IMF. In the 15th General Overview of IMF Quotas, India pointed out that 'Both, enhancement in the Quantum of Quota Resources and Realignment of Voting Shares should take place so that Quota Shares of EMDCs (Emerging Market & Developing Countries) increase in line with its growing relative economic position in the world' (PTI, 2018).

The United Nations is celebrating the 75th anniversary of its inception, and the United Nations General Assembly schedules a special high-level event on 21 September 2020 with the theme 'The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism'. This can also be used as a platform to discuss and implement the much-needed reforms in the United Nations, especially regarding permanent membership and veto power (Nations, 2020). India's health diplomacy associated with COVID-19 has allowed India to ignite the spark for international organisations' reform. The global image that India has acquired by sending financial aid, medical equipment, medical practitioners and medicines to various parts of the world can be leveraged to sow the seeds of reforms in the membership, structure, governance and functioning of the international organisations. The decision-making powers in international organisations like WHO, WTO, IMF, IBRD and the United Nations are not evenly distributed to all its members. The governing procedures and institutional structure are biased towards the financially well-off countries in the world. The under-developed and developing countries of the world usually are sidelined when it comes to taking crucial and significant decisions. India has the potential to become part of the core committee of these international organisations by being the largest democracy and one of the fastest-growing economies. India's membership in G-20 is evidence of the same (Puri, 2020).

The health diplomacy associated with international assistance provided by India during COVID-19 can further reiterate and validate India's claim for the reforms of the international organisations in such a way that the capabilities of India will also be well heard in the functioning and governance of international organisations. By projecting its capabilities, India shall grab the vacuum evident in the functioning of

core members of WHO, IMF, IBRD and the United Nations as they were unable to resist the challenges posed by COVID-19 successfully.

### **Strengthening Bilateral Relations: Selected Examples**

Bilateral relations play a significant role as far as the existence and prosperity of sovereign states are concerned. The interactions and conduct of socio, political, cultural and economic relations between two sovereign countries are normally facilitated through diplomatic dialogues, discussion and cooperation. During pandemics, it is not a country or a group of countries that is the enemy but an invisible virus that does not discriminate people or boundaries to attack, it is essential for countries to keep aside the differences and strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations. Health diplomacy is one way to help and assist the states in containing pandemics and strengthening bilateral relations. Let us see some selected examples of how India is exploring health diplomacy during the time of the COVID crisis to improve and fix the pandemic spread as well as its bilateral relations with other countries. Authors have shortlisted those countries to which India had extended considerable health support during the time of the pandemic. This includes immediate neighbours, extended neighbours, traditional partners and major powers.

India was the first country belonging to a non-communist background to launch diplomatic relations with China on 1 April 1950. 2020 marked the 70th anniversary of the inauguration of India-China diplomatic relations. On account of COVID-19, the celebrations commemorating the same were cancelled, but heads of both countries have exchanged congratulatory messages and made the projected elated remarks about the two countries working together to 'bring more benefits to the two countries and peoples and contribute more positive energy to Asia as well as the world' (PTI, 2020). The government of India is cautious about not blaming China for the cause of COVID despite US President Donald Trump's repeated accusations against China in this regard. Since no country can claim that they are completely ready to fight the invisible enemy, bilateral cooperation and coordination can only help contain the virus by sharing learnings and strategies. In the regular press conference held on 23 March 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang reiterated India and China's ongoing cooperative and coordinated activities on epidemic prevention and control (China, 2020). He said India had provided medical supplies to China during the crisis and Indians supported China when COVID was an epidemic in China. For its part, the Chinese embassy had established a contact mechanism with the health department of India to give them updates about the situation periodically. The Chinese government facilitated the evacuation of stranded Indians in Hubei and Wuhan provinces and did the needful to protect the health of Indian citizens in China. Getting inspired by China's successful initiatives, India also implemented a complete nationwide lockdown from 25 March to 17 May to identify the hotspot to contain the spread of coronavirus. Since China has virtually overcome the virus and opened up its factories, like other countries, India also must depend upon China for sharing the strategies and equipment to contain the virus. It looks prudent to the Indian government to take assistance from China for the testing kits, personal protection kits, masks, medicines, and strategies instead of politicising the ulterior motives of the Chinese as now the priority is saving the life of the people. India and China share many commonalities, especially with regard to the size of human resources and the economy. Through health diplomacy, the relationship between India and China can



also be furthered in the long term by collaborating on medical and scientific research. Virology institutes of both countries can collaborate to avoid pandemics in the future or even deal with the situation now. Apart from this to have a developed economy, to ensure regional security in Asia counter-hegemonic aspirations of the US and European countries and finally to facilitate the creation of the 21st century as an Asian century, it is essential for both countries to have cordial bilateral relations, especially during the COVID crisis. Health diplomacy can help India and China, relatively young nation- states and millennia-old civilisations, individually and together to save the life of its people as well as the existence and survival of the state itself.

India and the United States have been pursuing a strategic partnership for quite some time on account of shared perspectives and views on democracy, pluralism, and the rule of law. Both countries are part of numerous economic collaborations, security arrangements and global initiatives. Two countries have been engaged in civilian nuclear cooperation and military exercises (Kronstadt, 2009). The COVID crisis has given new arenas for Indo-US bilateral relations. Both countries can take collaborative initiatives to invent the vaccine against COVID-19. Both countries have commonalities with great reservoirs of bio- medical and virology research. The presence of Indian-American doctors and scientists in both countries can facilitate the naturalisation of bilateral medical relations. Addressing the intellectual property and regulatory issues between the two countries can give better mileage for India's medical diplomacy and the United States of America. India had relaxed the ban imposed by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) for the export of Hydroxychloroquine to assist the United States which has the largest number of positive cases and deaths related to COVID-19. The US president acknowledged India's positive response to the US's demand to export Hydroxychloroquine by tweeting, 'Extraordinary times require even closer cooperation between friends. Thank you, India and the Indian people for the decision on HCQ. Will not be forgotten!' when India agreed to allow exports of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine to the US which is being seen as a possible cure for COVID-19' (Singh, 2020). Beyond this acknowledgement, India can expect changes in the approaches and strategies of the US towards India. The United States is not happy and is warning India to Counteracting America's Adversaries Through Sanctions (CAATSA), for India's contract for five squadrons of S-400 SAMs for the Indian Air Force from Russia (Balachandra, 2018). Apart from this, the United States of America has also planned to restrict the H-1B visa for Indians to 15 per cent. This could massively affect the IT sector of India. IT professionals would struggle to get jobs in the United States of America. Indian firms with US clients will not be able to send their representatives to the US (Mukherjee, 2019). India would expect some attitude changes from the United States in this regard through health diplomacy during the COVID crisis.

In October 2019, the relationship between India and Malaysia had strained when the former Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad, addressing the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) accused India's decision to revoke article 370 of the Indian constitution as a move of 'invading and occupying the country of Jammu and Kashmir. It is believed that in retaliation to this India imposed restrictions on the import of palm oil from Malaysia. This had brought irks in the India- Malaysia bilateral relations. COVID has brought some truce in this regard. Malaysia's Deputy Foreign Minister Kamarudin Jaffar said, 'On 14 April 2020, India had permitted Malaysia to

import 89,100 hydroxychloroquine tablets.' With the new leadership of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in Malaysia supplemented by COVID diplomacy, India would see the possibility of reviving its bilateral relations with Malaysia. India's high commissioner to Malaysia, Mridul Kumar says, 'there is a new vigour in the countries' relationship'(Takhtani, 2020).

After the Delhi Riots, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the revocation of article 370 of the Indian constitution, Iran made harsh statements and remarks against India. The crack in India-Iran bilateral relations became clearer to the world when Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif condemned in March 2020 'the wave of organised violence against Indian Muslims', and urged the Modi government to 'not let senseless thuggery prevail'. Adding to this after a few days, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei warned India that if it did not stop the extremist Hindus, India would see an 'isolation from the world of Islam'. India has also stopped the import of oil from Iran since May 2019 on account of the US sanctions. But the COVID-19 has allowed both countries to mend the fractures in their relationships through health diplomacy. India and Iran cooperated to evacuate the Indians who were stranded in Iran (Bhatia, 2020). Iran also sought the support of India to deal with the pandemic. Iran also expected support from India against the sanctions of the United States. India also sent a 5,022 MT wheat consignment to assist Afghanistan in dealing with the crisis put forward by COVID-19 through Iran's Chabahar port (Sibbal, 2020). Iran had also facilitated flights from India meant for evacuating Indian citizens from Iran. COVID diplomacy has brought back lost energy and vigour in India-Iran relations.

India's relations with Russia were once considered as a 'special and privileged strategic partnership' (Lee, 2014). But off-late there is a stagnation or downswing in the Indo-Russia bilateral relations. There are many factors responsible for bringing a gap between India and its all-weather friend Russia. The increasingly warm and active India's bilateral relations with the United States of America, India's defence agreements with the USA, Russia's arms supply and military exercises with Pakistan, and Russia getting closer to China are some of the factors responsible for drifting both the countries to the opposite side. The unexpected situation created by the COVID-19 crisis can be explored in terms of addressing the downswings in India Russia relations. Despite the US threats, India is all set to buy five batteries of the S400 system in a deal worth more than \$5 billion (PTI, 2020). India is in close contact with Russia as far as a pandemic is concerned. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had wished the Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who tested positive for COVID, early recovery and good health (PTI,2020). Russia also thanked India for supplying hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol tablets. Russian President Putin's Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov commented, "Moscow is well aware that India, which itself is going through difficult times in terms of fighting the epidemic threat, made this decision guided by the common spirit of partnership between the two countries" (Embassy, 2020). JSC Rosoboron export, Russia's intermediary defence export agency, has committed to donating \$2 million to the Indian Prime Minister's Care Fund (Haidar, 2020). The proposed donation is to assist the Indian government's efforts in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though there are long-term difficulties in India-Russia relations, efforts to heal the strained India-Russia bilateral relations have been initiated through the health diplomacy stimulated by the COVID crisis. Therefore, it is evident that the health diplomacy initiated by India during

COVID-19 can bring significant changes in the bilateral relations for India (Avhad, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

In today's globalised world, health challenges cannot be solved by the health sector alone or by a single nation's initiatives. Health challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic require political negotiations and solutions, cessation of hostilities, migration of health professionals, and transfer of medicines and technologies. Health is everyone's business. Therefore, the pandemic necessitates multilateral cooperation among individuals, states and non-state actors. Health diplomacy mobilises statesmen, policymakers and other community representatives to collaborate to solve the health problem. The COVID-19 pandemic has unravelled the possibilities of health as a core concept of diplomacy. Statecraft and diplomacy of all the nations, including India, are trying to leverage the potentialities of health as a component of soft power to carve its niche in the changing dynamics of world order customised and accelerated by globalisation. Indeed, the pandemic has pushed health from the auxiliary concept of diplomacy to diplomacy's core concept. There are several advantages to using health as a soft power tool for countries to emerge out of the pandemic. The countries that can leverage this tool effectively, will be the leaders in the post COVID world order, which will be working more collaboratively than before. India has several advantages and challenges in pursuing this agenda for its foreign policy. The challenges of health care infrastructure are something that can be surmounted through international help if they play their card of capabilities and human capital well.

Indeed, India's health diplomacy during pandemic helped India to materialize the opportunities provided by health diplomacy at the international level through the prism of soft power. It has opened the gateways of symbolic capital to India. This symbolic capital would give India goodwill, prestige, influence, credit and power at the bilateral and multilateral forums. By increasing the production of medical equipment and medicines, the Indian government can not only cut short the import of the same but also can earn income through its export. This can also aid and assist Indian diplomats while negotiating and drafting humanitarian medical interventions as part of health diplomacy at the global level. The health diplomacy associated with international assistance provided by India during COVID-19 can further reiterate and validate India's claim for the reforms of the international organisations in such a way that the capabilities of India will also be well heard in the functioning and governance of international organisations. Significant impacts could also be made in the bilateral and multilateral relations of India with its immediate neighbours, extended neighbours and major powers of the world.

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