

# India's Relations with Neighbours During the Pandemic: Opportunity and Challenges

Sanjit Pal\*

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**Abstract:** *This article illustrates how India interacted with its neighbours during the pandemic. Material help, political clout, and historical links were part of India's traditional neighbourhood strategy. The pandemic presented India with an opportunity to strengthen regional connections and showcase its commitment to regional cooperation. Since the beginning of the pandemic; India has provided humanitarian aid and boosted the internal economy. During the pandemic, the inadequate health infrastructure of the neighbours was revealed. These countries were the least prepared to deal with the problems of a pandemic. India has taken the lead in giving crucial medical supplies and vaccines to neighbouring nations, resulting in a warm spot in the people's hearts towards India. Through health diplomacy, India was able to develop its relations with its neighbours due to the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *Pandemic, Neighbourhood First, Aggressive China, Humanitarian Aid, Health Diplomacy.*

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\* Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Naba Barrackpur Prafulla Chandra Mahavidyalaya.  
e-mail: sanjitpal76@gmail.com

## **Introduction**

Almost every country has been affected by the devastating Corona virus disease (COVID-19). It has also impacted the foreign policies of almost every other country in the world, including India. Our notion of “Neighbourhood First” captures India’s most significant foreign policy goal. It emphasises the renewed importance we place on neighbouring nations in upgrading and strengthening our ties. Because of pandemic, India has taken the initiative in providing critical medical supplies to neighbouring countries in need. During this time, India’s foreign policy has faced challenges, particularly from an aggressive China. To restrain China, a rising force on its border, and create connections with neighbouring nations, India gives humanitarian aid and boosts the internal economy, which in turn creates a soft corner for India in the hearts of the people in the region. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, this article includes in-depth information on India’s relations with its neighbouring countries.

## **Indo-China Relations**

India and China have enjoyed cordial ties for thousands of years of recorded history. In 1950, India recognised the People’s Republic of China as the legitimate government of mainland China<sup>1</sup>. The importance of their bilateral relationship has grown as their diplomatic and economic might has grown. Territorial tensions, competition over status, and mutual distrust have characterised the contemporary China-India relations. COVID-19 has posed enormous economic, geopolitical, and perceptual obstacles to their already precarious bilateral relationship. The Indian government has undertaken tactical and strategic modifications to its China policy due to this predicament. This virus is thought to have originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan, in the province of Hubei. Beijing’s lack of transparency and slowness to intervene in the early phases has been criticised by many countries. India has always been careful in its foreign policy considerations when it comes to China and has been hesitant in denouncing China for its participation in the spread of the virus. However, later Indian government actions, such as one in which a representative of the Indian Council of Medical Research blamed Chinese technology for the ineffectiveness of coronavirus treatment, have brought to light the Indian government’s growing hostility towards China. After discovering that half a million Chinese test kits were defective, India cancelled the order. In addition, the government has sought to lessen its reliance on China by increasing domestic manufacturing of testing kits and safety gear.

Through medical diplomacy, a simmering soft power conflict between China and India over control of the pandemic was developing in South Asia. By contributing its military might, New Delhi helped its neighbour project a humanitarian image. The Indian Air Force offered essential overseas evacuation help to citizens of neighbouring nations during the early stages of the pandemic. India also provided medical equipment

and medications to its neighbours. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the need for regional collaboration in the fight against the pandemic and committed a \$10 million contribution to the SAARC Emergency Fund<sup>2</sup>. China is building diplomatic ties with European and South Asian countries to challenge India's rising regional influence.

China and India have decided to celebrate their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2020. To commemorate the occasion, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping declared 2020 the "Year of India-China Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges" and announced plans to hold 70 events<sup>3</sup>. These ambitions were postponed due to the pandemic, and Indo-China ties were impeded by unilateral territorial conflicts like the Galwan Valley war. Taking advantage of the distraction created by the pandemic in India, China, which had by that time managed to contain the pandemic on its soil, raised tensions along the border, resulting in clashes that claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers<sup>4</sup>. The Chinese move sparked a massive outpouring of patriotism and unity among Indians. It also led to India banning several Chinese applications and imposing investment restrictions on China. India has been exploring reducing its reliance on China, for which they have discussed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union, which has been in the works for the last eight years. The Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, which Japan, Australia, and India recently formed<sup>5</sup> is yet another way India is attempting to find alternate supply-chain systems that are now reliant on China.

### **India-Bangladesh Relations**

India and Bangladesh have had long-standing socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic relations. In 1971, India was instrumental in Bangladesh's independence. As a result, Bangladesh became a natural ally of India. Both countries established diplomatic relations after signing the Treaty of Friendship on March 19, 1972<sup>6</sup>. Over the last five decades, the two countries have strengthened their political, economic, trade, and cultural ties while also establishing a comprehensive institutional framework to promote bilateral relations. Rather than broadening its ties with Bangladesh, India has seen a shift in Bangladesh's priorities in recent years. Dhaka wishes to have good relations with India, but it is wary of its western big brother's shadow. Consequently, China has been hailed as one of Bangladesh's most significant allies. Due to the Indian government's perceived anti-Muslim and anti-Bangladeshi activities, such as India's interference in Bangladeshi politics, killings of Bangladeshis by Indian BSF, Citizenship Amendment Act, the rise of Hindutva in India, and India's reluctance in resolving water disputes in common rivers with Bangladesh, anti-India sentiments have risen among Bangladesh's citizens in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

During the pandemic, both nations strengthened their ties in a variety of sectors, notably in the domain of healthcare. Bangladesh has received three tranches of medical help from the Indian government. The first tranche included 30,000 surgical masks and 15,000 head coverings, while the second and third tranches included 50,000 gloves and 100,000 HCQ pills, as well as 30,000 RT-PCR test kits. In January 2021, about 2 million doses of the Covishield vaccination were supplied to Bangladesh as part of a grant<sup>8</sup>. Bangladesh also offered India medical assistance. Bangladesh provided 30,000 PPE kits, 10,000 vials of Remdesivir, and several thousand of each of zinc, calcium, vitamin C, and other supplements at the Indian border port of Petrapole<sup>9</sup>. Both countries have actively discussed Covid-19 vaccine collaboration, including Phase-III testing, vaccine distribution, co-production, and delivery in Bangladesh, etc.

### **Indo-Pakistan Relations**

India's relationship with Pakistan has never been friendly and remains hostile. Since independence, many wars and conflicts have erupted between the states, with the discovery of ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LOC). Both nations leveled numerous complaints against one another. While the Vajpayee government took steps to restore ties, several diplomatic conversations were held, but none of them resulted in a satisfactory end. After the Pakistan-based Jaish-E-Mohammad (JEM) terror organisation killed 44 CRPF personnel in Pulwama, India launched air attacks on terror training sites in Balakot, causing tensions between the two countries to worsen<sup>10</sup>. The abrogation of Article 370 of India's Constitution in August 2019, which withdrew Jammu and Kashmir's special status<sup>11</sup>, further deteriorated ties. Pakistan tried unsuccessfully to raise the Kashmir issue at international forums to obtain support against India. New Delhi has made it clear to the world community that the repeal of Article 370 is a matter for India alone. It also urged Pakistan to recognise reality and refrain from spreading anti-India propaganda.

Islamabad also accused New Delhi of "politicizing" the discussions at Paris's Financial Action Task Force (FATA) meetings, a worldwide anti-money laundering agency. The FATF chose to keep Pakistan on its 'grey list' until February 2021 because it failed to meet six essential commitments, including failing to prosecute two of India's most wanted terrorists, Jamaat ud-Dawah chairman Hafiz Saeed and JeM leader Masood Azhar<sup>12</sup>. India and Pakistan also disagreed on how Kulbhusan Jadhav, who is on death sentence in Pakistan, should be represented in his review appeal in the Islamabad High Court against his conviction by a Pakistani military court for suspected spying throughout the year. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and combined efforts by members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to limit the deadly virus provided a chance for the two countries to build a beneficial relationship.

Still, they were unable to take advantage of the circumstance. Thousands of Pakistanis have been calling on the Pakistani government to provide medical assistance to India out of humanitarian concerns. Following that, Pakistani government made offers India to give ventilators, digital X-ray machines, and personal protective equipment as a show of solidarity<sup>13</sup>. Even though India did not accept the offer, it acts as a friendly, people-led confidence-building measure that we desperately need more.

During the pandemic, India resurrected SAARC as a platform to develop a regional action plan to battle the pandemic and initiated to establish SAARC COVID-19 Fund to help the neighbouring countries. Except for Pakistan, which pledged US\$3 million to the SAARC COVID-19 Fund and said that its contribution would be parked with the SAARC Secretariat to combat COVID-19, all of the nations made direct promises to contribute to this Fund. This represented a divided opinion between India and Pakistan about how the fund should be administered. It showed how the state of relations between India and Pakistan still affects regional diplomacy. India committed US \$10 million to establish such a regional fund, accounting for half of the total. Sri Lanka gave \$5 million, with Bhutan (\$100,000), Bangladesh (\$1.5 million), and the Maldives (\$200,000) following closely behind. Pakistan has made a \$3 million contribution to the SAARC Secretariat<sup>14</sup>. After only a few sessions, the SAARC COVID-19 Fund has been paralysed by policy paralysis due to the India–Pakistan bilateral issue, which has turned COVID-19 difficulties into bilateral agreements. The SAARC COVID-19 Fund may have been utilised to expand vaccination supplies to the regions near vicinity. Pakistan is the only country that didn't get the vaccine from India; instead, it got it from China.

### **India-Sri Lanka Relations**

The Indian-Sri Lankan connection dates back over two thousand five hundred years in different areas like Intellectual, cultural, religious, and linguistic exchanges, etc. In the SAARC region, Sri Lanka is one of India's most important trade and development partners. After the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000, trade between the two nations developed quickly<sup>15</sup>. The Indian Housing Initiative in Sri Lanka is India's largest grant project in any country, with nearly 60,000 dwellings pledged by India. About 49,112 houses have already been built as part of this promise<sup>16</sup>. Aside from housing, India supports a significant variety of high-impact community growth projects around the nation, including education, health, transportation connections, small and medium-sized company development, and training.

The obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic brought India and Sri Lanka together. India provided Sri Lanka with four consignments totaling more than 25 tonnes of crucial medications, medical gloves, and other supplies<sup>17</sup>. On March 15,

2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa took part in a SAARC leaders' video conference on combatting COVID-19, which India hosted. Sri Lanka has committed \$5 million to the SAARC Covid Emergency Fund, which was established at this video conference<sup>18</sup>. India and Sri Lanka collaborated extensively to facilitate the smooth return of their stranded citizens to each other's countries. Around 3500 stranded Indians returned from Sri Lanka to India as part of the Vande Bharat Mission, which included 11 planes, one ship, and many chartered flights. Indian authorities helped in the return of hundreds of Sri Lankan nationals from several Indian towns. In January 2021, India provided Sri Lanka with 500,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine as a gift. Sri Lanka will import 100 metric tonnes of medical-grade oxygen from India next week to address a supply problem in hospitals. In April-May 2020, almost 26 tonnes of critical medical supplies were donated<sup>19</sup>.

### **Indo-Bhutan Relations**

Indo-Bhutan relationship is a unique example of friendship, not only in Asia but also in the world. The basis for bilateral relations between India and Bhutan developed immediately after India gained its independence and is formed by the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949<sup>20</sup>. By virtue of this treaty, India strove hard to modernize Bhutan both strategically and economically. Since the beginning of 1960s, when the Royal Government of Bhutan embarked on the economic development of the Kingdom, India has been the major donor of aid for Bhutan's economic development. Since the 1960s, particularly after the 1962 Indo-China War, Bhutan has been trying to gradually diversify its relations with other countries, particularly China. This diversification effort in foreign policy gained prominence with Bhutan's democratic transition in the early 1990s. With this reality in mind, both nations resolved to amend the 1949 Treaty and signed the Friendship Treaty in 2007<sup>21</sup>. This allows Bhutan a complete freedom to conduct its external affairs. Today Bhutan is more interested in maintaining an equidistant relation with both India and China.

During recent pandemic, the Government of India ensured continuous supply of trade and essential items to Bhutan. Bhutan was one of the first nations to receive medical supplies from India through the Corona Virus Emergency Fund in 2020<sup>22</sup>. Government of India so far has provided essential medicines and medical supplies, including Paracetamol, Hydroxychloroquine, PPEs, N-95 masks, x-ray machines and test kits, etc to the Royal Government of Bhutan. India has also entered into an 'Air Travel Arrangement' or 'Transport Bubble' agreement with Bhutan for the resumption of flights in a gradual manner with Bhutan, which was suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. India is also collaborating with Bhutan for conducting Phase-III clinical trials of the Covid-19 vaccine candidates. 150,000 doses of Covishield vaccine were

sent to Bhutan in January 2021 as grant assistance<sup>23</sup>. Bhutan has also committed to providing Assam with a daily supply of 40 metric tonnes of liquid oxygen from a new plant constructed in the Motanga Industrial Estate in the Samdrup Jongkhar district. Meghalaya Oxygen Private Limited, based in Assam, holds a 49% stake in the plant<sup>24</sup>. Due to the pandemic, work on the plant had been suspended, but it has been resumed at the request of the Indian government.

### **Indo-Nepal Relations**

Nepal and India have had a profound and personal relationship since time immemorial. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 serves as the foundation for this friendship<sup>25</sup>. This treaty provided for an open border between the two countries, enabling the free and unfettered movement of people and products and allowing Indian and Nepalese citizens to migrate freely between the two countries with equal rights. As COVID-19 expanded globally, relations between Nepal and India deteriorated in South Asia when India's defence minister, ignoring Nepal's objections, virtually launched a new 80-kilometre route in the Himalayas on May 8, linking to the Chinese border at the Lipulekh pass in west Nepal<sup>26</sup>. The Nepali government promptly complained, claiming that the route traverses its claimed territory and accusing India of altering the status quo without diplomatic consultation. As a result, the relationship between India and Nepal has deteriorated.

The recent pandemic brought both nations' major and problematic issues into sharp view, notably on the economic front, namely Nepal's growing trade imbalance with India and a porous border. Nearly two-thirds of Nepal's product imports and exports are sent to India. In 2018–2019, Nepal imported \$8.7 billion in goods from India, accounting for approximately 93.6 percent of total imports. During this period, Nepal's trade deficit was US \$7.6 billion<sup>27</sup>. This imbalance accounted for nearly two-thirds of Nepal's overall goods trade deficit. India and Nepal have an open border policy that allows people to travel freely between the nations. Thousands of Nepalese travel to India for employment, while Indians frequently visit Nepal for business. The Indian government closed the Indo-Nepal border to prevent the spread of the Corona Virus. As a result, tens of thousands of people have left Kathmandu to return to their homes. The Nepalese government has been put under pressure to provide jobs for migrant workers due to this tragedy.

India has supplied Nepal with medical equipment and medicines, including paracetamol, hydroxychloroquine, and remdesivir. India also helped Nepal limit the COVID-19 epidemic by providing RT-PCR Test Kits, ventilators, and other critical medical equipment<sup>28</sup>. The Himalayan country has received a medicinal oxygen plant from India. On April 22, India provided Nepal with 23 tonnes of medicine. Despite

the pandemic's hardships, India maintained a steady flow of bilateral commerce and supplies to Nepal. As part of a contribution to Nepal, India provided one million doses of the Covishield vaccine in January 2021<sup>29</sup>.

### **India-Afghanistan Relations**

India and Afghanistan have long had historical and cultural ties. Afghanistan's strategic location and demographic composition made it critical for global politics, particularly in India. Following the partition, Afghan King Zahir Shah chose friendship with India, which was strengthened by signing the "Friendship Treaty" in 1950<sup>30</sup>. During the 1950s and 1960s, Kabul pursued a non-aligned foreign policy with a slight pro-Soviet slant, bringing it closer to New Delhi. The Taliban era (1996–2001) was the lowest point in India-Afghanistan relations. The rise of the Karzai regime provided an opportunity for India to re-establish ties with Afghanistan. During the recent pandemic, the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan. Soon after taking Kabul, the Taliban renamed the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> This incident will have far-reaching consequences for global politics in general and India in particular. India has not yet recognised the current Taliban government and is pursuing a wait-and-see policy. However, academics disagree about India's current policy toward the Taliban regime. Some academics argue that India should recognise the Taliban government as a form of leverage against Pakistan. A diplomatic foot will help India consolidate its influence and more effectively counter anti-Indian groups. Some critics argued that recognising or engaging with the Taliban would be futile if their leadership remained under Pakistan's control. If India recognises the Taliban regime, it effectively legitimizes a Pakistani proxy conglomerate that includes the Haqqani Network and rewards the ISI. Over the years, India has developed positive relationships with the Afghan people and regional countries such as Iran, Uzbekistan, and Qatar, which will be critical in protecting India's interests in Afghanistan. India currently chairs the Sanction Committee for the Taliban and Libya and the Counter-Terrorism Committee as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The presence of India in the U.N. Security Council will allow New Delhi to keep an eye on the Taliban and work to reduce uncertainty for Afghans and the region.

The humanitarian and economic difficulties in Afghanistan during the pandemic have offered an opportunity for India to rethink its strategy. New Delhi discreetly allocated roughly US \$27 million in Indian rupees for Afghanistan aid in its fiscal budget for 2022–23<sup>32</sup>. India provided Afghanistan with aid relating to COVID-19 through Chabahar Port, comprising more than 20 MT of life-saving medications and 75,000 MT of wheat for humanitarian purposes to improve the country's food security situation. In February 2021, 500,000 doses of the Covishield vaccination were donated



to Afghanistan<sup>33</sup>.

### Conclusion

We may conclude that India's foreign policy focuses on its relations with its neighbours. The importance of India's neighbours in foreign policy originates from a clear awareness that a peaceful periphery is necessary for India to realise her many developmental ambitions. However, there is hostility and mistrust against India among the neighbouring countries. China's increasing influence in South Asia has exacerbated anti-Indian sentiment among neighbours. India has taken proactive measures to provide essential medicines, sharing its own experiences in tackling the pandemic and sending rapid action teams to its neighbours to cope with the recent pandemic situation. In the battle against the pandemic, India has shown a solid commitment to improving regional cooperation and coordination. The focus of India's diplomatic and economic initiatives is increasingly on health. During the pandemic, India worked quickly to put in place measures to facilitate cross-border trade, which was vital in the supply chain for crucial goods, ensuring no shortages. India's soft power was originally bolstered through foreign policy vaccination diplomacy. As a result, it may be able to counterbalance China's influence in the region, at least initially. However, India's soft power image had vanished by the second wave. When India was forced to stop sending vaccines abroad, China could re-enter the Indian neighbourhood by delivering vaccines. In this context, India must evaluate its neighbourhood strategy using a realistic paradigm rather than predetermined notions of pragmatism.

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