



India's Covid -19 Diplomacy in the year of Pandemic

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Is a mutation of the existing corona virus likely to become a global headache in 2021? Perhaps, this is one of the most unsettling statements with which one could have opened an article on the times ahead of us. But the last year was one eventful year in every sense of the term. 2020 was a year of ironies. It was the year in which the world became one, courtesy of the pandemic's global reach, even as countries turned inwards to protect their citizens. But as international borders were getting sealed, the flow of ideas to combat the contagious virus hopped from one nation to another, and so did economic and moral assistance. In what may be described as "CoVIDiplomacy", this neologism captures well the international negotiations that went on as countries came together to extend support and solidarity with peoples of other nations in the trying year. India too came forward to discharge its responsibility as a burgeoning economic and R&D Centre too many countries in South Asia and beyond.

India's Covid diplomacy took many forms in 2020. Nationally, while it imposed one of the most stringent lockdowns in the entire world, it carried out a relatively successful international mission of bringing stranded Indians back home. Called "Vande Bharat", India ensured evacuation of thousands of its citizens stuck in different parts of the world, thereby easing the load on their host countries too. At the same time, it also aided the repatriation of foreign nationals to their respective home states by creating specific air corridors or air bubbles. Besides facilitating timely, and much-needed, movement of people across sealed international borders, India also extended other kinds of support, especially to its neighbors. From providing tons of grain to Afghanistan to offering critical medical supplies to Nepal and Myanmar, India's CoVIDiplomacy proved efficient in building bridges in the fraught South Asian region. Similarly, its stated assurance to provide

'indigenously made vaccine' to Bangladesh on priority basis can be viewed as India's conscious diplomatic outreach to thaw the coldness that had crept into its bilateral ties for other reasons.

India's CoVIDiplomatic efforts were not restricted to its home region alone. It went far and beyond South Asia to provide the USA with large dosages of Remdesivir to help the latter deal with the virus outbreak. Its naval fleet too, in this case, INS Air vat, was put to use to provide African countries of Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea with 270 million tons of food aid. From helping countries cope with the pandemic all this

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while, today, India has joined hands with South Africa to seek equitable distribution and affordability of internationally-produced vaccines by petitioning against their patenting. This measure is likely to go a long way in ensuring that developing and least developed countries are not deprived of their rightful share of the so-called miraculous medicine.

The lessons of the "new normal" must not be forgotten. Simultaneously, the friendly CoVIDiplomatic outreach that was being carried out in the pandemic's wake must continue to take place in even friendlier forms. India's CoVIDiplomacy has shown that it is the neighbors' you reach out and count on in trying times. Now, the emphasis must be on keeping this momentum going.

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