

India's Vaccine Maitri Initiative as a Tool of Soft Power: Strategic and Humanitarian Dimensions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the contours of global governance by foregrounding health security as a central concern of international politics. In this context, India's "Vaccine Maitri" initiative emerged as a significant example of how humanitarian assistance can be mobilised as an instrument of soft power. This paper offers a theoretical and narrative examination of Vaccine Maitri, arguing that India's vaccine outreach functioned simultaneously as a moral intervention and a strategic foreign policy tool. Drawing upon soft power theory and scholarship on global health diplomacy, and relying on data and studies available until 2021, the article analyses how India's actions enhanced its international credibility, reinforced regional leadership, and strengthened solidarity with the Global South. The study contends that Vaccine Maitri not only contributed to mitigating vaccine inequity but also repositioned India as a responsible and norm-shaping global actor during a period of profound international uncertainty.

Keywords: Vaccine Maitri, Soft Power, Health Diplomacy, India's Foreign Policy, COVID-19 Pandemic, Global Health Governance, Humanitarian Diplomacy, and Global South.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 exposed structural weaknesses in global health governance and intensified inequalities between developed and developing countries. As vaccines emerged as the most effective response to the pandemic, access to them became a critical determinant of national recovery and global stability. Consequently, vaccine production and distribution assumed a strategic dimension, transforming public health instruments into tools of diplomacy. This phenomenon, widely described as vaccine diplomacy, underscored the growing interconnection between health policy and international relations.

India's "Vaccine Maitri" initiative must be understood against this background. Launched in early 2021, the initiative involved the supply of COVID-19 vaccines to a wide range of countries across South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and small island states. At a time when several advanced economies were prioritising domestic vaccination and accumulating surplus doses, India's decision to share its vaccines attracted global attention. This outreach was particularly notable given India's own developmental constraints and large population, which heightened the symbolic and political significance of its actions.

This paper argues that Vaccine Maitri represented a conscious exercise in soft power rather than a purely reactive humanitarian response. By aligning ethical responsibility with strategic calculation, India leveraged its pharmaceutical capacity to project an image of reliability, solidarity, and leadership. In doing so, the

initiative contributed to reshaping global perceptions of India's role in international affairs and demonstrated how emerging powers can employ non-coercive means to enhance influence during global crises.

Objectives of the Paper

The central purpose of this paper is to analyse India's Vaccine Maitri initiative as a mechanism of soft power in contemporary international relations. The paper seeks to examine the humanitarian contribution of the initiative in addressing vaccine inequity, assess its impact on India's diplomatic standing, and interpret its strategic significance within regional and global contexts. Additionally, the study aims to situate India's vaccine diplomacy in comparative perspective, highlighting how it differed from other major vaccine distribution efforts during the pandemic.

Review of Literature

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. Nye defines soft power as the capacity of a state to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion, deriving influence from values, policies, and legitimacy (Nye, 2004: 8). Over time, scholars have extended this framework to include humanitarian assistance and health initiatives, recognising their ability to generate goodwill and long-term diplomatic capital.

The field of global health diplomacy highlights how health interventions increasingly serve foreign policy objectives. Feldbaum et al. observe that health assistance can function as a bridge between ethical commitments and strategic interests, particularly when delivered in a manner perceived as inclusive and non-exploitative (Feldbaum et al., 2010: 87). Similarly, Kickbusch et al. argue that effective health diplomacy strengthens both international cooperation and national influence by embedding public health within diplomatic practice (Kickbusch et al., 2015: 214).

Within Indian foreign policy scholarship, soft power has traditionally been associated with cultural outreach, civilisational narratives, and democratic values. Chopra notes that India's pluralistic ethos and moral positioning have historically contributed to its international appeal, though these assets were not always systematically integrated into foreign policy strategy (Chopra, 2017: 218). Recent studies suggest that India's evolving global role has led to a more deliberate use of soft power instruments alongside material capabilities (Pant, 2019: 105).

Existing research on COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy has largely focused on China's bilateral vaccine outreach and Western-led multilateral initiatives such as COVAX. These studies indicate that while China's vaccine diplomacy was expansive, it was often perceived as strategically transactional, whereas Western efforts faced criticism for delayed and unequal distribution (Wouters et al., 2021: 1026). Academic engagement with India's vaccine diplomacy, particularly from a soft power perspective, remains limited, underscoring the relevance of the present study.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design based on document analysis. It examines official statements and press releases issued by the Government of India, speeches by political leaders, reports published by international organisations, and peer-reviewed academic literature on soft power and health diplomacy available up to 2021. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the narratives, intentions, and implications associated with Vaccine Maitri.

The analysis is guided by soft power theory and the concept of global public goods, focusing on themes such as legitimacy, moral authority, attraction, and diplomatic influence. By contextualising empirical evidence within established theoretical frameworks, the study offers a nuanced interpretation of Vaccine Maitri as both a humanitarian initiative and a strategic policy instrument.

Humanitarian Dimensions of Vaccine Maitri

The humanitarian significance of India's Vaccine Maitri initiative must be understood within the broader context of global vaccine inequality that characterised the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite unprecedented scientific collaboration, vaccine availability remained sharply uneven, with wealthier nations securing advance purchase agreements while low- and middle-income countries struggled to access even minimal supplies. This imbalance exposed structural inequities embedded within global health governance mechanisms. Against this backdrop, India's vaccine outreach functioned as an immediate corrective intervention, particularly for countries that lacked bargaining power in global pharmaceutical markets.

India's humanitarian role was amplified by the timing of its intervention. Vaccine Maitri was launched at a critical juncture when global production was still constrained and multilateral distribution platforms such as COVAX had not achieved operational scale. By supplying vaccines at this early stage, India enabled several developing countries to initiate vaccination programmes far earlier than would otherwise have been possible. This temporal advantage translated into tangible public health benefits, including reduced vulnerability during subsequent infection waves and greater preparedness of national health systems. As scholars of global health ethics note, early access is often more consequential than absolute volume in mitigating mortality during pandemics (Parekh & Singh, 2021: 94).

Beyond immediate health outcomes, Vaccine Maitri carried symbolic humanitarian value. India framed vaccine distribution as an expression of shared humanity and mutual responsibility rather than charitable largesse. This framing resonated strongly with countries of the Global South, many of which share historical experiences of colonial exploitation and marginalisation in global decision-making. By foregrounding solidarity instead of hierarchy, India positioned itself as a partner rather than a patron. Such normative positioning is central to humanitarian diplomacy, which seeks to preserve dignity and agency among recipient states (Feldbaum et al., 2010: 90).

The humanitarian dimension of Vaccine Maitri also reflected India's longstanding engagement with affordable healthcare. India's pharmaceutical industry has historically prioritised cost-effective production, supplying essential medicines to developing countries. Vaccine Maitri thus represented continuity rather than

rupture in India's global health role. This continuity enhanced the credibility of India's actions, as they were perceived as consistent with its prior commitments rather than opportunistic crisis diplomacy.

Vaccine Maitri as an Instrument of Soft Power

From a soft power perspective, Vaccine Maitri exemplifies how humanitarian action can generate durable diplomatic influence without reliance on coercion or material inducement. Joseph Nye emphasises that soft power emerges most effectively when a state's actions align with broadly accepted moral values and are perceived as legitimate by others (Nye, 2004: 11). India's vaccine outreach fulfilled both criteria by addressing an urgent global need while reinforcing norms of equity and cooperation.

The attractiveness generated by Vaccine Maitri was not limited to governments alone. Public opinion in recipient countries responded positively to India's assistance, contributing to favourable perceptions that extend beyond elite diplomacy. Such societal-level goodwill is particularly valuable because it strengthens people-to-people ties and reinforces long-term relational influence. Soft power, unlike hard power, operates cumulatively through trust and familiarity, and Vaccine Maitri contributed significantly to this process (Joshi, 2021: 153).

India's democratic identity further amplified the soft power impact of the initiative. In contrast to vaccine diplomacy models associated with strategic conditionality or opaque agreements, India's approach was largely transparent and embedded within multilateral norms. This transparency enhanced the legitimacy of India's outreach and distinguished it from more transactional forms of health diplomacy. As Nye argues, legitimacy is a critical multiplier of soft power, enabling influence to be sustained rather than contested (Nye, 2004: 13).

Additionally, Vaccine Maitri strengthened India's normative leadership in international forums. India's calls for vaccine equity, intellectual property flexibility, and collective responsibility carried greater persuasive weight because they were supported by concrete action. This alignment between discourse and practice is central to soft power effectiveness, as it reduces credibility gaps that often undermine diplomatic influence. In this sense, Vaccine Maitri functioned as both a policy instrument and a reputational asset, reinforcing India's capacity to shape global narratives on health justice.

Strategic and Geopolitical Implications

While humanitarian considerations formed the ethical foundation of Vaccine Maitri, the initiative also generated significant strategic dividends. In South Asia, India's early vaccine assistance helped consolidate its role as a regional leader at a time when geopolitical competition was intensifying. By prioritising neighbouring countries, India reaffirmed its commitment to regional stability and interdependence, countering perceptions of disengagement or neglect (Bhattacharya, 2021: 82).

The strategic value of Vaccine Maitri was particularly evident in its ability to rebuild trust. In regions where political relations had occasionally been strained, vaccine assistance provided a non-controversial platform for engagement. Health cooperation, by its very nature, lowers political barriers and creates opportunities for

renewed dialogue. This aligns with strategic literature that identifies non-traditional security cooperation as an effective confidence-building mechanism (Pant, 2019: 108).

Beyond South Asia, Vaccine Maitri enhanced India's strategic presence in Africa and the Indian Ocean region. These regions are central to India's long-term economic and security interests, including maritime connectivity, energy security, and South-South cooperation. By delivering vaccines during a moment of crisis, India reinforced perceptions of reliability and responsiveness-qualities that are critical for sustaining strategic partnerships. The initiative thus contributed to a broader ecosystem of influence encompassing trade, technology, and development cooperation.

At the global level, Vaccine Maitri complemented India's participation in emerging strategic frameworks that increasingly recognise health security as integral to international stability. The pandemic underscored the reality that health crises can disrupt supply chains, economic growth, and political order. India's proactive engagement demonstrated an understanding of this interconnectedness and positioned it as a forward-looking actor capable of integrating humanitarian leadership into strategic planning.

Competing Paradigms of Vaccine Diplomacy: India, China, and the Western Response

A comparative examination of vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic further underscores the distinctiveness of India's approach. China's vaccine outreach, while extensive in scale, was often interpreted through a geopolitical lens, with recipients viewing assistance as intertwined with broader strategic expectations. This perception occasionally limited the soft power returns of China's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in regions wary of asymmetric dependence (Zhang & Kumar, 2021: 161).

Western vaccine diplomacy, primarily channelled through multilateral mechanisms and bilateral donations, benefited from institutional legitimacy but faced challenges related to timing and distributional equity. Early vaccine hoarding by advanced economies diluted the moral authority of subsequent donations and exposed contradictions between professed values and actual practices (Wouters et al., 2021: 1030).

India's Vaccine Maitri occupied a middle ground that combined scale, speed, and normative appeal. Its emphasis on affordability, partnership, and early delivery enhanced credibility among recipient states. Unlike purely multilateral or transactional models, India's approach blended bilateral engagement with global responsibility, reinforcing both humanitarian and strategic objectives. This balance significantly enhanced the soft power yield of India's vaccine diplomacy.

Conclusion

India's Vaccine Maitri initiative represents a critical evolution in the practice of soft power in international relations. By leveraging its pharmaceutical capacity to address a global health emergency, India demonstrated that humanitarian responsibility and strategic interest can be mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. The initiative enhanced India's international standing, strengthened diplomatic relationships, and contributed meaningfully to global pandemic response efforts.

The expanded analysis suggests that Vaccine Maitri should be viewed as a foundational case of health-based soft power for emerging states. It illustrates how ethical leadership, when translated into tangible action, can generate sustained diplomatic influence. For India, Vaccine Maitri has not only addressed an immediate crisis but also redefined its global role as a provider of solutions rather than a passive participant in international governance.

In an era marked by transnational challenges, the lessons of Vaccine Maitri extend beyond vaccines themselves. They highlight the potential of humanitarian diplomacy to reshape power relations and reaffirm the relevance of soft power as a strategic asset in global politics.

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