

The Coronavirus: Fueling Concerns and Contrasts between India and China

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On February 26, 2020, an Indian plane landed in Wuhan carrying medical supplies for China, which was then the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak. On its return, it evacuated a number of Indian and Bangladeshi nationals, as well as citizens of other countries. On the face of it, this is the kind of cooperative effort that is expected during a global public health crisis, with countries—even competitors—coming together at a time of need. However, the saga of that flight reflected another (prescient) dynamic—that COVID-19 would reinforce and increase rather than alleviate competition between China and India and complicate cooperation, with pandemic response and recovery efforts being seen through a competitive prism.

That flight to Wuhan was not smooth; indeed, it was much delayed. Delhi had announced it a week earlier. It was a way to help China, demonstrate India's capacity, and assist India's neighbors by evacuating their citizens.¹ But then Indian officials publicly, albeit anonymously, revealed that Beijing was not clearing the flight. The reason was unclear—China, after all, had been requesting international support. There also did not seem to be a bureaucratic snafu. So, was it the visual of Beijing accepting support from India, which Chinese officials and analysts sometimes dismiss as a less capable, even chaotic, neighbor? Was it the desire not to give India a soft power win, including with its neighbors? Was it because the flight involved a military transport aircraft procured from the U.S.? Was it retaliation for the temporary Indian detention of a Chinese ship bound for Pakistan due to a tip-off of dual-use items on board?² Or was the reason Chinese unhappiness about Indian travel restrictions to and from China, or Indian export limits on certain medical products? Whatever the reason, China eventually gave the flight clearance, but only a week later and after much Indian negotiation. It was an early sign that the public health arena would not be immune from the competitive atmosphere prevailing between the two countries, and in the region as a whole. Subsequent events only bore that out.

There has been considerable discussion about how countries' perceptions of China would change due to the pandemic—at the beginning because of its mishandling, and then because of its recovery. This chapter argues that, rather than change perceptions, Beijing's handling of COVID-19 increased the largely skeptical views of China that prevail in India, which had at least 29 million cases and over 385,000 deaths in India by mid-June 2021 (the 2nd and 3rd highest in the world respectively). This trend was further bolstered by the worst boundary crisis between the two countries since they fought a war in 1962.³

Together, the pandemic and the boundary crisis have ensured that the competitive and conflictual elements of the India-China relationship have been front and center over the last year. They have reinforced and accelerated concerns in India about China's lack of transparency, its uncertain commitment to the rules-based order, as well as its growing influence in the Indo-Pacific and in international institutions. And they have demonstrated that despite Delhi and Beijing's efforts to cooperate and to stabilize their relationship over the last two decades, it remains a fundamentally competitive one that can spill over into conflict.

This chapter examines the impact of first the pandemic and then the boundary crisis on perceptions of China among the Indian government, establishment, and public. It proceeds to outline the consequences of these perceptions on Indian domestic policy, its partnerships with like-minded major and middle powers, and its counter-COVID activism. Finally, it considers China's response, particularly to Indian policy changes.⁴

Perceptions

The Impact of the Pandemic

The Indian government's initial rhetoric about China's response to COVID-19 was measured.⁵ Delhi did impose travel restrictions, which Beijing disliked.⁶ However, unlike the United States, Indian officials did not criticize China publicly. This reflected their need to procure medical supplies from China, secure financing from institutions such as the New Development Bank in which Beijing is a key member, and keep the China-India relationship stable.⁷

Nonetheless, Beijing's domestic and international approaches to the pandemic fueled Delhi's existing strategic and economic concerns about China. Strategically, Delhi worried that Beijing would take advantage of the pandemic to increase its influence among India's neighbors in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region—particularly due to China's role in the medical products supply chain, as well as its relatively early recovery. And Beijing did indeed provide or offer medical supplies, financial assistance (through debt repayment restructuring or loans) and vaccines, and convene meetings bringing together the other South Asian countries.⁸

An additional worry was China portraying its system of governance, and its global and regional leadership role as more effective at the expense of others—especially democracies such as the U.S. and India. Beijing's approach vis-à-vis the World Health Organization (WHO) also reinforced standing Indian concerns about how China would use its influence in regional and global institutions.

Due to supply chain disruptions, the pandemic also amplified Indian economic anxieties, including overdependence on China for industrial inputs—India's pharmaceutical sector, for instance, sourced a significant amount of its advanced pharmaceutical ingredients from China.⁹ There was also concern about Chinese entities taking advantage of the crisis—and China's own early recovery—to acquire vulnerable Indian companies.¹⁰

The Indian establishment beyond the state, which shared many of these concerns, was more vocal in its criticism of China.¹¹ Retired diplomats faulted China for its initial lack of transparency about the origins and the outbreak of the pandemic, and its obfuscation or attempts to suppress information.¹² For them, it raised questions about China's claims to being a responsible stakeholder in the international community. There was also some concern that China's efforts to warn countries against travel restrictions were coercive. And there were questions about Beijing seemingly pressuring the WHO to acquiesce to its approach. Some former officials went even further, advocating the use of the term "Wuhan virus."¹³

There was also a line of argument previously rarely made by this group in public: that China's lack of democracy was part of the problem. Publicly, Indian analysts—especially those with government experience—often downplay or dismiss the nature of a country's regime in assessments. But there was a shift in this case. Former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, for instance, asserted, "There is no escaping the fact that COVID-19 may not have become a pandemic if China were a democracy with a free flow of information through an independent media and accountable political leadership." He bluntly criticized China's

efforts to “erase its culpability” and “overcome the damaging global public opinion which it has suffered by a subsequent sustained propaganda campaign.” One of his successors, Vijay Gokhale, took on the idea that China’s response had demonstrated the effectiveness of its governance and system. He argued that the initial handling of COVID-19 “dispelled the myths around the Beijing consensus. Try as the Chinese authorities might to showcase their system as having efficiently tackled a national emergency, even the remotest nation on earth has learned about their failure.”

Both these China hands also countered the Chinese line about democracies’ ineffectiveness, noting the examples of Taiwan and South Korea. Saran also pointed out that democracies’ transparency could be beneficial in responding to the crisis. Gokhale went further, arguing that it was incumbent upon India to tackle the pandemic effectively, in part to “show to the rest of the world, that imperfect as it may be, democracy is the better method of delivering results in the face of an international crisis.” He also suggested that the Communist Party of China might not want India to succeed in effectively tackling the pandemic—and pointed out that in the past it had used the widening China-India gap to emphasize to Chinese citizens that “choosing one’s leaders may not be a better option.” And he outlined the implications of democratic India’s success or failure for not just the Indian government but the Chinese regime too, saying that Chinese disparagement of India stemmed from fear: “The fear that if democratic India can deliver, the rule of the Communist Party can be challenged. India, not western democracies, is the real existential ideological threat. How we handle this crisis will determine our place in the world of the future.”¹⁴

Some Indian experts did call for cooperation with China, and even argued that the crisis could stabilize the bilateral relationship.¹⁵ Former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, on his part, cautioned against blame games.¹⁶ Others worried about the impact on Sino-Indian economic ties specifically or on globalization more broadly.¹⁷

The public reaction was largely critical, and built on existing concerns about China and even stereotypes about it. This was not surprising. In a 2019 poll, only 23 percent of Indians surveyed had a favorable view of China.¹⁸ And the pandemic only caused this anti-China sentiment to spike. A key theme in media and public discourse was blaming China as the origin of the virus, for its spread, and for its health and economic consequences in India and globally. Prime-time news segments, if not entire shows, focused on China’s role and culpability. Memes proliferated on social media.¹⁹ Some broad themes were evident: criticism for China’s lack of disclosure, its influence on the WHO, its sidelining of Taiwan, the quality of Chinese medical supplies, and what were seen as Beijing’s efforts to take diplomatic or commercial advantage of the crisis.²⁰

Chinese missions in India did not respond, as they did in other countries, with a “wolf warrior” approach directly targeting India. Rather, they focused on highlighting China’s own efforts to tackle the pandemic and the donation of supplies by Chinese companies to India, refuting media criticism about China’s approach, and criticizing the U.S. response to COVID-19.²¹ However, Chinese state-run media outlets have highlighted Indian setbacks and fueled skepticism about its ability to tackle the pandemic.²² And, as Beijing sought to propagate the theory that frozen food imports were responsible for coronavirus outbreaks, publications like *Global Times* repeatedly cited reports that the coronavirus had been detected on frozen seafood products from India, or speculated that the virus might have originated in India.²³

The Impact of the Boundary Crisis

Any success Chinese public diplomacy efforts might have had in India in spring 2020—and initial signs did not suggest they were having much impact—was overshadowed by what came next: the most serious boundary crisis between China and India in decades. In May, India accused the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of unilaterally attempting to change the status quo at multiple points at the Sino-Indian boundary, resulting in a military standoff and the first fatal clash (on June 15) between the two countries since 1975.²⁴ The ongoing boundary crisis is not the first stand-off along the un-demarcated Sino-Indian boundary in the Xi Jinping era. After two and a half decades of relative calm, the long-standing boundary dispute had flared up in 2013 and 2014, and the two militaries had also been involved in a 73-day stand-off in 2017 at the Bhutan-China-India trijunction. In each case, India had accused China of trying to change the status quo unilaterally, either by establishing a permanent presence or hindering Indian patrols in territory that both sides claim.

But the 2020-21 boundary crisis has been different. It has involved face-offs at multiple locations rather than just one, some territory that has not been contested for decades, larger deployments, a higher level of aggression, and the first fatalities and the first shots fired at the boundary in decades. Moreover, the crisis made clear that the set of boundary agreements, norms, and protocols that Delhi and Beijing had put in place between 1993 and 2013 to avoid just such escalations were insufficient or ineffective. Finally, the crisis developed at the same time as Beijing took an assertive stance on a number of fronts, including vis-à-vis Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, Canada, and Japan, as well as the South China Sea.

The motives for China’s initial moves in spring 2020 across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that serves as a de facto border between the two countries are still being debated. Among the questions that arose was whether the COVID-19 pandemic played a role. It is possible that it did at one or two levels. At the strategic level, analysts speculated that China’s full-court press against a number of countries might have stemmed either from: 1) Xi Jinping trying to demonstrate resolve or strength, in the face of domestic concern and international criticism of his regime’s handling of the pandemic,²⁵ or 2) Beijing’s desire to take advantage of other countries, including the United States, being on the backfoot or distracted due to the coronavirus.²⁶

There are still many unknowns, but the pandemic might have also had an impact at the operational level. While the PLA undertook its annual spring military exercises on its side of the LAC after a short delay, India had postponed its exercises due to the pandemic. The PLA is reported to have conducted its initial moves at the LAC by redeploying the troops involved in its exercises. The Indian postponement, though, meant that its military did not have a presence in matching strength on its side of the LAC to resist those steps. Moreover, the Indian military consequently required additional time to move troops, who are usually involved in the annual exercises, from other locations.²⁷

The boundary stand-off continued during the course of the year and through the first half of 2021. China has repeatedly sought a return to business as usual in the relationship, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other officials calling for the border issues to be placed in “a proper place in bilateral ties.”²⁸ However, while Beijing is seeking a restoration of the status quo ante in the relationship, Delhi has made clear that what it wants is a restoration of

the status quo ante at the boundary (i.e. the PLA to return to its positions as of late April 2020). Indian government officials have stressed that the boundary issue and the broader relationship cannot be separated, asserting that the “maintenance of peace and tranquility in border areas is *sine qua non* for progress in [the] rest of [the] bilateral relationship.”²⁹

Even as their militaries remain deployed in large numbers at frontline positions, the two countries’ military and diplomatic officials have continued to engage in dialogue. After a number of rounds of such discussions, in early 2021 the two sides reached agreement for their militaries to disengage at one of the stand-off locations.³⁰ The stand-off continues at others, and there has also not yet been a de-escalation of forces.

The impact of the crisis in India has been significant. As the Indian ambassador in Beijing noted, there has been considerable damage to Indians’ trust in China.³¹ It has hardened official views of China. And it has weakened the hands of those in Indian policymaking circles who argued for more engagement with China or for the idea that economic ties would help alleviate political strains. After the June 15 clash, the Indian external affairs minister told his Chinese counterpart, “this unprecedented development will have a serious impact on the bilateral relationship.” The Indian home minister, on his part, has linked China both to the boundary and health crises affecting the country.³²

Furthermore, the Indian government called Chinese “actions and behavior” at the border a “clear violation of the bilateral agreements and protocols concluded between the two countries” over a two-decade period from 1993.³³ The external affairs minister has issued repeated reminders that, despite a boundary dispute that dates back decades, “It was because of these agreements and the adherence to them that the bilateral relationship moved forward in other, different spheres, including the economic one.”³⁴

In the foreign and security policy establishment, there have been widespread calls for a reassessment of India’s China policy. The boundary crisis has resulted in a remarkable convergence among the Indian government’s former China hands, who believe that the fatal clash in June was a watershed moment, and the crisis has done significant damage to Sino-Indian ties. They have also predicted a more adversarial relationship in the future, and stressed the need for India to bolster its capabilities and partnerships to tackle China.³⁵ This has contrasted with the messaging coming from Chinese officials who have stated that “the orientation of China and India as partners, friendly cooperation and common development remain unchanged.”³⁶

As for Indian public sentiment on China, it was already sour due to the pandemic and only deteriorated with the killing of Indian soldiers in June. Among other things, this resulted in calls to boycott Chinese products, partners, and sponsors.³⁷

Consequences

The one-two punch of the pandemic and the boundary crisis have had consequences beyond a more competitive view of China in India. The increased Indian concerns—and in some cases, the abstract concerns now made real—have had at least three consequences in terms of India’s approach to China: first, domestic policy changes; second, doubling

down on like-minded partnerships; and third, active counter-COVID diplomacy. Arguably, if a year ago, one could describe India's approach as competitive engagement, today perhaps a better term is competitive coexistence—or at least a movement toward it.

Domestic Policy Changes

Policy consequences have resulted from the intensification of Indian concerns about: 1) economic overdependence on and exposure to China; 2) inroads that Chinese companies—particularly those with close links with the state—have made into sensitive Indian economic sectors, and 3) avenues of Chinese influence in the country. This has led to a slew of measures that will restrict or scrutinize Chinese activities in the economic, technology, telecommunications, civil society, and education sectors.

Before the boundary crisis, the Indian government announced restrictions on foreign direct investment from countries that share a land boundary with India—a move clearly directed against China. Furthermore, it reportedly urged the Securities and Exchange Board of India to increase its scrutiny of foreign portfolio investment from China and Hong Kong.³⁸

After the Chinese actions at the boundary, the Indian government took further action. Over the last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasized *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India). One of its key objectives is to reduce Indian economic dependence on China. Road Transport, Highways, and MSME Minister Nitin Gadkari stated, “imports from China will be discouraged and the country will take large strides towards self-reliance.” He added that, within his portfolio, Chinese companies could be excluded from future road construction projects.³⁹ Having amended public procurement rules “to enable imposition of restrictions on bidders from countries which share a land border with India” on defense and national security grounds,⁴⁰ India now requires vendors to identify the country of origin on its online procurement platform.⁴¹

There have also been reports of other steps, signals, and scrutiny. An Indian state government put on hold some agreements with Chinese companies, and indicated that the central government told them “not to sign any further agreements with Chinese companies.”⁴² Delhi has reportedly considered further measures to curb and scrutinize imports, including to prevent Chinese goods from being routed through third countries.⁴³ There were also reports that Indian state-owned oil companies would no longer use Chinese tankers to ship crude oil or petroleum products.⁴⁴ The government is also providing incentives for Indian and foreign companies to manufacture in India, and to reduce dependence on Chinese imports in particular sectors such as solar power, electronics, and pharmaceuticals.⁴⁵

Sino-Indian technology sector ties have also been affected. Amendments to Indian investment rules will adversely affect Chinese technology companies interested or operating in India. Moreover, in multiple tranches, India has banned a number of Chinese apps on the grounds that they are “prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order.” These include TikTok, almost a third of whose total downloads had come from India, as well as AliPay.⁴⁶

There has also been an impact on the telecommunications sector. State-owned firms BSNL and MTNL canceled a tender issued in March 2020 to upgrade their 4G networks. A revised tender is expected to exclude Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE from bidding to

provide equipment.⁴⁷ There has also been a shift from the Indian approach in early 2020 when the government had announced that it would permit all vendors, including Huawei, to participate in India's 5G trials.⁴⁸ In December 2020, the government issued a national security directive for the telecommunications sector that would establish a process and mechanisms to identify trusted sources and products. Subsequently, Huawei and ZTE were not included in a list of companies permitted to participate in 5G trials in India.⁴⁹

India's critical infrastructure assessment could go further and have implications for Chinese investment in additional sectors. There have been reports that Chinese-state-linked groups have targeted India's power grid, and the government has also acknowledged such attempts—though not that the attempts were successful.⁵⁰ Regardless, both the vulnerability of India's systems and the potential for the Chinese government to exploit them, including during crises or for coercion, will not be lost on the Indian government.

In addition, after a phase of encouraging travel and exchanges from China, the Indian government seems set to adjust course in this sphere as well. Delhi has reportedly considered requiring prior security clearance for visas for Chinese business, civil society, and academic professionals. Indian institutions and universities' agreements with Chinese organizations, particularly Hanban, are also being reviewed and are likely to be discouraged.⁵¹

The response to these policy changes in India has been mixed. There have been questions about India's ability to reduce dependence on China, and the costs that will entail—particularly as India deals with the economic fallout of the pandemic. There are also concerns about supply disruptions, especially since Modi has been emphasizing the importance of India playing a greater role in global value chains. Others have questioned the government's motives, suggesting its restrictions stem more from a protectionist impulse and are reminiscent of pre-liberalization import substitution policies.⁵² And there has been anxiety in some quarters of the technology sector because China has been a major source of investment for Indian start-ups—by one estimate, two-thirds with a billion-plus-dollar value have at least one Chinese investor. Some of these investments have reportedly been put on hold.⁵³

Former Indian officials have acknowledged that these restrictions will hurt India, but have argued that it is still worthwhile to take these steps to reduce Indian exposure to and overdependence on China—and noted that it might be easier to take these steps when Indians are already feeling economic pain as a result of the pandemic. Gautam Bambawale, a former Indian ambassador to China, also expected these steps to lead to a deterioration of Sino-Indian ties, but said “so be it.”⁵⁴ Others have argued that alternative sources of capital and imports exist and should be explored. Indian government officials, on their part, have indicated that they neither expect overnight outcomes nor total decoupling, but have stressed the importance of starting the process.

Like-Minded Partnerships

The heightened concerns about China stemming from the pandemic and boundary crises have also resulted in India doubling down on—or seeking to deepen—partnerships with like-minded countries like the U.S., Australia, Japan, France, and to some extent South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Russia. Particularly as India has been tackling a trifecta

of national security, health, and economic crises that have exacerbated its resource constraints, these partnerships help India: 1) enhance its own capabilities, 2) balance and deter China, and 3) ensure that a rules-based and multipolar order prevails in the region.

And it has found willing partners. After all, India has not been the only country with twin concerns about China related to Beijing's handling of the pandemic and assertive behavior. These concerns have helped fuel a more competitive view of China in a number of major and middle powers—and in a country like the UK, arguably even caused a shift away from a relatively accommodating approach.⁵⁵ These concerns have also resulted in discussions among these powers about unilateral and collaborative efforts to signal their displeasure with China, insulate their own systems and societies, build individual and collective resilience, blunt Chinese influence in international organizations, deter further assertiveness from Beijing, and limit the gains China can make in smaller states.

Thus, there is demand in India and supply from other countries for partnership. And over the last year, India has deepened ties, including with the U.S. Bilaterally, Delhi has been in close touch with Washington through the boundary crisis, seeing the U.S. as helpful in terms of being a source of diplomatic support, military equipment, and intelligence. The two countries held an in-person 2+2 defense and diplomacy ministerial dialogue in October, signing a “foundational” agreement that will facilitate interoperability and intelligence sharing. Momentum has not flagged with the transition in Washington, with Delhi engaging actively with the Biden administration on a range of issues and welcoming an early visit by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in March. With Australia, India signed a military logistics sharing agreement, upgraded its 2+2 to the ministerial level, and reached an agreement to cooperate on cyber affairs and critical technology.⁵⁶

Beyond the bilateral dynamics, concerns about dependence on China—and the potential for supply chains getting disrupted or being used coercively—have also led India, along with Australia and Japan, to discuss a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative. A meeting of their economic ministers noted that they would welcome other like-minded partners.⁵⁷

Delhi has also deepened its cooperation with Australia, Japan, and the U.S. via the quadrilateral dialogue or “Quad.” An in-person ministerial was held in Tokyo in October 2020, and, after hesitating for a number of years, Delhi invited Australia to participate in MALABAR, the annual India-Japan-U.S. maritime exercise, in November. Last year, India also participated in a deputy secretary of state-level grouping with the other Quad countries and New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam to discuss and tackle COVID response and recovery.

With the Biden administration embracing the Quad, Delhi agreed to a ministerial in February 2021, and, for the first time, a leaders' summit in March—despite sensitive ongoing talks with China, which has objected to the Quad as an anti-China bloc.⁵⁸ The Quad leaders outlined the purpose of this “flexible group of like-minded partners,” alluding to China without mentioning it: “striving to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is accessible and dynamic, governed by international law and bedrock principles such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, and that all countries are able to make their own political choices, free from coercion.” While there have been questions in some quarters in the U.S. about how aligned India is on values because of what is perceived as a strain of illiberalism, the countries also emphasized their identities as democracies as being a crucial part of

what united the Quad. They also noted their desire to see a region “anchored by democratic values.”⁵⁹ Outcomes of the summit included a vaccine initiative (more on this below), and a critical and emerging technology working group that, among other things, will address critical infrastructure and supply chain resilience.⁶⁰

India is also likely to be open to participating in other such issue- or interest-based coalitions. For instance, a potential D10 (G7+Australia, India, and South Korea, proposed by Britain to deal with concerns related to reliance on China for 5G and other technologies). In June 2020, it also joined the Canadian and French-proposed Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence as a founding member.⁶¹ Delhi has also taken the lead in forming other such initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and the Global Coalition for Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure (China is a member of neither).

Simultaneously, India is continuing to participate in plurilaterals that involve another partner— Russia—as well as China: the Russia-India-China trilateral, the BRICS grouping, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, the scope and degree of these interactions are more limited, though they do provide a platform for Delhi and Beijing to engage even during crises.⁶² Delhi also considers participation in these initiatives to be important to bolster its Russia relationship. It continues to view Moscow as a key partner, particularly in the defense equipment and technology realm, despite concerns about Russia’s deepening ties with Beijing.⁶³

Counter-COVID Diplomacy

Some of these partnerships have also played a role in the third area where concerns about China have made an impact on the Indian approach: counter-COVID diplomacy. India’s activism, particularly before it was hit with a deadly COVID-19 wave in spring 2021, had multiple objectives: countering China’s attempts to increase its influence; bolstering India’s image as a provider of global public goods and first responder in its neighborhood; and, taking advantage of its partners’ concerns about China, highlighting itself as an attractive alternative option for investment from their countries.

The Indian government was proactive during the first year of the pandemic with diplomatic outreach, economic aid, technical assistance, and the provision of medical supplies. South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been a special area of emphasis—in part to mitigate Indian concerns about increasing Chinese influence in this area. For instance, Delhi announced additional financial assistance to Maldives, as well as a currency swap arrangement and debt rescheduling discussions with Sri Lanka.⁶⁴ It also helped evacuate its neighbors’ citizens from third countries, and convened health officials from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation member states.⁶⁵

Delhi’s ability to respond to China portraying itself as a model—and contrast to democracies—as well as a regional public goods provider will depend over time on how India ultimately fares in this pandemic, in health, economic, and social terms. However, in the initial year (before the spring 2021 COVID-19 surge), the Indian government was not shy about publicizing its efforts. It even highlighted Delhi’s assistance to China at the start of the pandemic, while emphasizing that most of the supplies India received from China were commercially procured.⁶⁶

Recognizing its constraints, including a capabilities gap with China, Delhi also saw a role for its major power partners. While it has traditionally disapproved of external powers' activism in South Asia, it has recently not looked askance at like-minded countries' efforts in the region. For instance, Washington has provided assistance to a number of countries in the region affected by the coronavirus. And, when in office, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke with the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to discuss the pandemic.⁶⁷ The Biden administration announced it would be sending vaccines to the region. Tokyo, on its part, agreed to provide both additional loans and budgetary support to Bangladesh.⁶⁸ India will also be working with its Quad counterparts on a major vaccine initiative that will make an additional 1 billion doses available by 2022, particularly in Southeast Asia.⁶⁹

Indeed, India's status as the largest manufacturer of vaccines in the world gave it the opportunity to assist its neighbors, contribute to the WHO's COVAX facility, and highlight the delivery of India-produced vaccines procured by countries around the world. By late March 2021, India had disbursed over 10 million vaccine doses on a grant basis. Nearly 18 million Indian-made vaccines were also supplied to COVAX, and 35 million doses were purchased by and dispatched to other countries.⁷⁰ The foreign ministry frequently publicized the arrival of these vaccines in various countries, and the messages of gratitude received. The Indian media meanwhile covers any stumbles that China's vaccines face in the region, highlighting the contrast.⁷¹

The Indian government was not reticent about emphasizing contrasts with China, particularly on the reliability front. For instance, it lifted or made exceptions to its export restrictions on certain pharmaceuticals, even as countries were concerned about various Chinese restrictions and supply disruptions.⁷² Partly, this stemmed from hope that countries and companies that might choose to diversify post-COVID-19 will come to see India as attractive—either as an alternative to China or as part of countries and companies' diversification (or China-plus-one) strategies. Modi himself has pitched India as the un-China, telling investors, "If you want returns with reliability, India is the place to be. If you want demand with democracy, India is the place to be. If you want stability with sustainability, India is the place to be."⁷³

China's Response

The Chinese response, particularly to India's policy measures, has been a mix of persuasion, objections, warnings, and suggestions of legal action or retaliation. In isolation, one or two Indian steps might not have mattered to the Chinese government—India, for instance, is far more dependent on Chinese imports than the other way around. But collectively, they can have an impact. Moreover, in particular sectors such as telecommunications and technology, these Indian restrictions have implications for Chinese companies' valuations and their access to a significant and growing market. Beijing has also seemed to worry about the global impact and perceptions of the Indian moves, and has raised questions about the link between Indian actions and those of others like the U.S. and Australia.⁷⁴

Thus, the Chinese government has objected to a number of the steps India has taken to restrict Chinese activities. The Chinese ambassador to India Sun Weidong has spoken to civil society and media audiences calling for relations to get back on track. But he has also warned against the “forced decoupling of the Chinese and Indian economies,” noting that “it will only lead to a ‘lose-lose’ outcome.” The ambassador has further suggested that Indian restrictions “violate market laws and WTO rules.” Furthermore, he has reminded Indians of how dependent they are on imports of certain products from China, and has warned that even non-Chinese multinational companies operating in India will be adversely affected.⁷⁵ Chinese state-linked media outlets have gone further, suggesting that Beijing could retaliate (that, however, would likely only prove the Indian government’s point and could lead to further Indian restrictions, including, for instance, on exports of pharmaceuticals to China). Finally, Chinese analysts have been dismissing India’s attractiveness as an alternate destination for investment, for example, questioning its capability or highlighting obstacles such as labor trouble.⁷⁶

There have been some questions about whether progress in disengagement talks could lead to India reversing some of its policy changes. It is possible, even likely, that if the border situation improves, Delhi will ease some restrictions and approve certain Chinese investments, but only in non-sensitive sectors. Broadly though, as Shyam Saran asserted in July 2020, “tensions may subside, but the relationship will never be the same again.”⁷⁷ Delhi will not stop engaging Beijing in the future, but the nature, extent, and expectations of that engagement will change.

Moreover, India’s increased engagement with like-minded partners will have an effect on China. Beijing has been critical of Delhi deepening these ties, particularly via the Quad. There is a debate about whether in response China should take a carrot or stick approach toward India. Those advocating the latter have called for more pressure on India, arguing that it is effectively a U.S. ally. Those recommending the former, however, have suggested alleviating tension and creating a wedge between India and the like-minded states.⁷⁸ The outcome of this debate will likely determine how far competition between China and India goes—and how intense it gets.

Conclusion

In spring 2021, India experienced a deadly second COVID wave. In contrast to China, where the costs of the outbreak in Wuhan were unclear, the consequences in an open society such as India were visible and stark. So were some of the competitive trends mentioned above, including China portraying itself to India’s neighbors as a stabler and more effective provider. On the positive side, just as India assisted China at the beginning of the pandemic, Beijing offered to help India. However, just like the story at the start of this chapter, once again what started as a cooperative move got mired in concerns about China suspending cargo flights, Chinese suppliers raising prices of essential supplies, the question of whether Beijing was offering assistance or merely using commercial contracts to make a point, and the issue of whether India would even accept help from China.

In the months ahead, as India tackles the pandemic, a former Indian foreign secretary’s contention remains valid: “how we handle this crisis will determine our place in the world of the future.” The outcome of its efforts will also determine India’s ability to serve as

a geopolitical contrast, economic alternative, and an effective democratic contrast to China. And it will shape the debate about whether democratic or authoritarian states are more effective at tackling crises and delivering solutions for their own publics, as well as the region.

Endnotes

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