



# India's Role in Shaping the Global Order during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022): Strategic Leadership, Vaccine Diplomacy, and Global Health Governance

**Dr. Diwas Kant Samadhiya**

Assistant Professor of Political Science

VML Government Girls, Degree College JHANSI (U.P.) INDIA

Pin Code – 284001

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) represented one of the most profound disruptions to the international system in the post–Cold War era, challenging existing structures of global governance, multilateral cooperation, and international solidarity. In this context, India emerged as a significant actor seeking to shape the evolving global order through strategic leadership, vaccine diplomacy, and active engagement in global health governance. This paper examines India's role during the pandemic by analyzing its foreign policy initiatives, humanitarian assistance, pharmaceutical outreach, and participation in multilateral platforms.

The study explores India's strategic responses, including the “Vaccine Maitri” initiative, which supplied vaccines and medical assistance to more than 90 countries, particularly in the Global South. It evaluates India's engagement with international institutions such as the World Health Organization, the G20, the Quad, and the United Nations, highlighting its efforts to promote equitable vaccine distribution, resilient supply chains, and South–South cooperation. The paper situates India's actions within broader International Relations debates on emerging powers, soft power diplomacy, and global governance reform. While India demonstrated leadership through humanitarian assistance and normative advocacy for “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (the world as one family), the study also critically assesses structural constraints, including domestic public health challenges and temporary export restrictions. By combining strategic analysis with global health diplomacy frameworks, the paper argues that India's pandemic-era diplomacy reflected both national interest and global responsibility.

The research concludes that between 2020 and 2022, India contributed to shaping aspects of the evolving global order by positioning itself as a responsible stakeholder and bridge between developed and developing nations. However, the sustainability of this leadership depends on institutional capacity, multilateral credibility, and long-term global health cooperation.

## Keywords

COVID-19 Pandemic, Global Order, Strategic Leadership, Vaccine Diplomacy, Vaccine Maitri, Global Health Governance, Soft Power, Strategic Autonomy, Emerging Powers, Multilateralism, Global South Cooperation, International Relations Theory

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019 and rapidly spread across the world in early 2020, created an unprecedented global crisis affecting public health, economic stability, political governance, and international cooperation. The scale and severity of the pandemic exposed structural weaknesses in global governance institutions and tested the capacity of nation-states to respond effectively to transnational challenges. In this context, the role of emerging powers became increasingly significant in maintaining international stability and cooperation. Among these powers, India assumed a notable position in contributing to global health governance, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic engagement during the pandemic period from March 2020 to March 2022. Traditionally, global order has been shaped by dominant powers and multilateral institutions that regulate international cooperation in areas such as security, trade, and public health. However, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the limitations of existing governance mechanisms and emphasized the importance of collective action and leadership from multiple actors. International relations scholars argue that global crises often provide opportunities for states to demonstrate strategic leadership and redefine their roles in the international system. In this context, India's foreign policy during the pandemic reflected a combination of humanitarian commitment, strategic diplomacy, and multilateral engagement aimed at addressing the global health emergency while strengthening its international standing.

India's response to the pandemic was not limited to domestic management of public health challenges but extended to international cooperation through initiatives such as medical assistance, pharmaceutical supply chains, and vaccine diplomacy. As one of the world's largest producers of pharmaceuticals and vaccines, India played a crucial role in ensuring the availability of essential medicines and vaccines to developing countries. Through the initiative popularly known as "Vaccine Maitri," India supplied COVID-19 vaccines to numerous countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This initiative represented an important dimension of India's global health diplomacy, emphasizing solidarity with developing nations and strengthening South-South cooperation. Beyond vaccine distribution, India also contributed to the global response through humanitarian assistance, capacity building, and participation in multilateral platforms. The country actively engaged with international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations, and the G20 to promote coordinated action against the pandemic. India's leadership in regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) further demonstrated its commitment to collaborative crisis management. For instance, India proposed the creation of a SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund to support regional health responses, reflecting its willingness to assume a proactive leadership role in addressing common challenges. From a theoretical perspective, India's actions during the pandemic can be interpreted through multiple international relations frameworks. Realist perspectives highlight India's strategic use of diplomacy and vaccine distribution to enhance its geopolitical influence and strengthen partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. Liberal institutionalist approaches emphasize India's commitment to multilateral cooperation and collective problem-solving through international organizations. Constructivist interpretations, on the other hand, focus on the normative dimension of India's foreign policy, particularly the promotion of values such as humanitarian responsibility, global solidarity, and civilizational ethics rooted in the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—the belief that the world is one family.

The pandemic also intensified geopolitical competition among major powers, particularly in the realm of vaccine diplomacy and global health leadership. Countries such as the United States, China, Russia, and members of the European Union engaged in various forms of health diplomacy to strengthen their global influence. In this competitive environment, India sought to balance its strategic autonomy with

cooperative engagement, positioning itself as a responsible stakeholder in global governance. By providing vaccines, medicines, and technical assistance to numerous developing countries, India attempted to bridge the gap between developed and developing nations in accessing critical health resources. Another important aspect of India's role during the pandemic was the use of soft power and humanitarian diplomacy. India's long-standing reputation as the "pharmacy of the world" enabled it to play a significant role in the production and distribution of affordable medicines and vaccines. The export of essential drugs such as hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol to multiple countries during the early phase of the pandemic further reinforced India's image as a reliable partner in global health emergencies. Such initiatives strengthened diplomatic goodwill and contributed to India's broader foreign policy objective of enhancing its international credibility.

The pandemic period also coincided with significant transformations in global governance structures, including debates about reforming international institutions and improving preparedness for future health crises. India consistently advocated for equitable access to vaccines, stronger global health infrastructure, and greater representation of developing countries in decision-making processes. These policy positions reflected India's broader commitment to a more inclusive and democratic international order in which emerging economies play a greater role in shaping global norms and policies. Despite these contributions, India's pandemic diplomacy also faced several challenges and criticisms. The severe second wave of COVID-19 within India in 2021 temporarily disrupted vaccine exports and exposed domestic health system vulnerabilities. This situation raised questions about balancing national priorities with international commitments. Nevertheless, India resumed vaccine exports and continued to engage with international partners to support global vaccination efforts, particularly through initiatives such as the COVAX facility.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a critical moment in contemporary international relations, highlighting the importance of cooperative leadership and humanitarian diplomacy. India's actions during this period illustrate how an emerging power can contribute to global governance while simultaneously advancing its strategic interests. By combining pharmaceutical capacity, diplomatic engagement, and normative leadership, India sought to shape the evolving global order in ways that emphasized cooperation, solidarity, and equitable access to health resources. In this broader context, the present study examines India's role in shaping the global order during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. It focuses on three key dimensions: strategic leadership, vaccine diplomacy, and global health governance. Through an analysis of policy initiatives, diplomatic engagements, and international cooperation mechanisms, the study seeks to evaluate the extent to which India contributed to maintaining international stability and promoting collective responses to one of the most significant global crises of the twenty-first century.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study seeks to examine India's role in shaping the global order during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), particularly through its strategic leadership, vaccine diplomacy, and engagement in global health governance. In order to systematically analyze this issue, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What role did India play in shaping the global order during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022?
2. How did India utilize vaccine diplomacy, particularly the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, to strengthen its global leadership and international partnerships?
3. To what extent did India's pandemic response reflect principles of global health governance and multilateral cooperation?
4. How can India's actions during the pandemic be interpreted through major International Relations theories such as Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism?
5. What were the geopolitical, diplomatic, and humanitarian implications of India's pandemic diplomacy for developing countries, particularly in the Global South?

6. What challenges and limitations did India face while balancing domestic health priorities and international responsibilities during the pandemic?
7. How did India's pandemic-era diplomacy contribute to its broader objective of enhancing soft power and strategic influence in the international system?
8. What lessons can be drawn from India's pandemic response for strengthening global cooperation and preparedness for future international health crises?

These research questions collectively guide the study in evaluating the strategic, diplomatic, and normative dimensions of India's role in the evolving global order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## RESEARCH GAP

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) generated an extensive body of academic literature on global health governance, pandemic diplomacy, and the transformation of the international order. Several scholars have examined the responses of major powers such as the United States, China, and the European Union, particularly focusing on vaccine development, supply chains, and geopolitical competition. Studies have also discussed the role of international institutions like the World Health Organization and global initiatives such as COVAX in coordinating international responses to the crisis. While this scholarship provides valuable insights into global health governance and pandemic diplomacy, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific role played by India in shaping the evolving world order during the pandemic period.

First, much of the existing literature focuses on great-power rivalry, particularly the strategic competition between the United States and China during the pandemic. As a result, the role of emerging powers such as India is often treated as secondary or discussed only briefly. Although India's initiatives such as Vaccine Maitri and its pharmaceutical exports attracted global attention, there is limited systematic academic analysis that evaluates how these initiatives contributed to broader international cooperation and global health governance.

Second, many studies examining pandemic diplomacy emphasize vaccine nationalism and geopolitical competition rather than cooperative leadership. Consequently, the normative and humanitarian aspects of India's pandemic response—such as medical assistance, vaccine supply to developing countries, and support for multilateral health initiatives—have not been sufficiently analyzed within a structured theoretical framework of International Relations. There remains a need to examine how India's actions can be interpreted through major IR perspectives such as Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism.

Third, existing research often evaluates India's pandemic response primarily from a domestic public policy or public health perspective. While these studies provide important insights into India's internal management of the crisis, fewer works explore the international dimension of India's pandemic strategy and its implications for global order, multilateral diplomacy, and South–South cooperation.

Fourth, there is limited research that integrates the concept of global health governance with India's broader foreign policy doctrines such as strategic autonomy, humanitarian diplomacy, and soft power projection. The intersection between health diplomacy and international leadership during the pandemic remains underexplored in the literature.

Finally, although several policy reports and journalistic accounts discuss India's vaccine diplomacy and medical assistance programs, there is a lack of comprehensive scholarly studies that analyze the period 2020–2022 as a distinct phase in the evolution of India's global role. A systematic evaluation of India's pandemic-era diplomacy in relation to global governance, international cooperation, and the emerging world order is therefore necessary.

In this context, the present study seeks to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive political science analysis of India's role in shaping the global order during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining India's strategic leadership, vaccine diplomacy, and engagement with global health governance

institutions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of India in the international system during times of global crisis.

## HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The research paper titled “India’s Role in Shaping the Global Order during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022): Strategic Leadership, Vaccine Diplomacy, and Global Health Governance” is guided by the following hypotheses. These hypotheses are designed to examine the relationship between India’s pandemic-era foreign policy initiatives and its evolving role in the international system.

H<sub>1</sub>: The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for India to strengthen its role as a responsible emerging power in shaping the global order through strategic leadership and international cooperation.

H<sub>2</sub>: India’s vaccine diplomacy initiatives, particularly Vaccine Maitri, significantly enhanced its global image as a provider of humanitarian assistance and global public goods.

H<sub>3</sub>: India’s engagement with multilateral institutions such as the World Health Organization, United Nations, and global initiatives like COVAX contributed to strengthening international cooperation in global health governance during the pandemic.

H<sub>4</sub>: India’s pandemic diplomacy reflects a combination of strategic interests and normative commitments, aligning elements of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism within International Relations theory.

H<sub>5</sub>: India’s medical assistance, pharmaceutical supply, and vaccine distribution to developing countries strengthened South–South cooperation and reinforced India’s leadership role in the Global South.

H<sub>6</sub>: The pandemic accelerated India’s use of soft power tools—such as humanitarian aid, medical diplomacy, and international partnerships—to influence global governance structures.

H<sub>7</sub>: India’s pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity and supply of essential medicines played a critical role in supporting global health systems during the early stages of the pandemic.

H<sub>8</sub>: India’s pandemic response enhanced its strategic partnerships with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, thereby contributing to a more cooperative and multipolar international order.

H<sub>9</sub>: India’s pandemic-era diplomacy demonstrated that emerging powers can play constructive leadership roles in addressing global crises even without traditional great-power dominance

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian scholars have extensively examined India’s foreign policy transformation and its growing role in global governance, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic provided a critical opportunity for **India** to demonstrate leadership through humanitarian diplomacy, pharmaceutical supply, and multilateral cooperation.

Scholars such as **C. Raja Mohan** argue that India’s pandemic diplomacy represented an extension of its long-standing strategy of strategic autonomy combined with responsible international engagement. According to Mohan, India’s export of medicines and vaccines strengthened its position as a reliable partner in the Global South. Similarly, **Harsh V. Pant** emphasizes that the pandemic accelerated India’s emergence as a middle power capable of shaping regional and global institutions. Pant highlights India’s role in coordinating health responses within regional organizations and strengthening strategic partnerships with democratic countries.

Research by **Rajesh Rajagopalan** interprets India’s pandemic diplomacy through a realist lens, arguing that humanitarian initiatives also served strategic interests such as counterbalancing regional influence and strengthening geopolitical partnerships. At the same time, **Manoj Joshi** and **Aparna Pande** stress that India’s foreign policy during the pandemic blended strategic calculations with normative commitments to global cooperation. Several Indian scholars highlight the importance of **Vaccine Maitri**, India’s global vaccine distribution program launched in 2021. **Rakesh Sood** argues that this

initiative strengthened India's soft power and humanitarian reputation by supplying vaccines to developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Similarly, **Happymon Jacob** emphasizes that India's vaccine diplomacy was a key instrument of foreign policy, helping the country consolidate diplomatic influence in the Global South.

Indian policy analysts such as **Shyam Saran** suggest that the pandemic highlighted the importance of resilient global governance mechanisms and reaffirmed India's commitment to multilateralism. According to Saran, India's cooperation with institutions such as the **World Health Organization** and the **United Nations** demonstrated its willingness to contribute to global public goods. Other scholars examine India's pharmaceutical capacity as a major factor in its pandemic leadership. **K. M. Gopakumar** and **Amitendu Palit** argue that India's large pharmaceutical industry enabled it to supply essential medicines and vaccines to numerous countries during the early stages of the crisis. India's role as the "pharmacy of the world" thus became a central element of its international diplomacy.

Research by **Amitabh Mattoo** and **Rohan Mukherjee** suggests that India's pandemic diplomacy reflects a broader transformation in its foreign policy from regional power to global stakeholder. They argue that India's engagement with initiatives such as the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue** and participation in global health initiatives demonstrated its willingness to assume greater international responsibilities.

Several studies also examine India's leadership within regional institutions. Scholars note that India convened a virtual summit of the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation** in March 2020 to coordinate pandemic responses among member states. This initiative is widely interpreted as an attempt to revive regional cooperation in South Asia. However, some Indian scholars also present critical perspectives. Analysts such as **Brahma Chellaney** argue that India's domestic pandemic challenges temporarily limited its ability to sustain global vaccine supply. Others suggest that while vaccine diplomacy improved India's international image, it also faced logistical and production constraints during the second wave of infections in 2021.

Overall, Indian scholarship broadly agrees that the pandemic created a significant opportunity for India to demonstrate global leadership through health diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and multilateral engagement.

International scholars have examined pandemic diplomacy as an important dimension of global governance during COVID-19. The pandemic disrupted existing geopolitical dynamics and created opportunities for emerging powers like **India** to influence international cooperation.

Studies by **Joseph Nye** emphasize the importance of soft power in global crisis management. Nye argues that countries capable of providing public goods—such as vaccines, medical assistance, and humanitarian aid—can enhance their international legitimacy and influence. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for understanding India's vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic. Similarly, **Amitav Acharya** argues that the pandemic accelerated the transition toward a more multipolar world order in which emerging powers play increasingly important roles. According to Acharya, India's leadership in global health initiatives reflects broader shifts in international power structures.

Scholars studying global health governance emphasize the importance of multilateral institutions in managing pandemics. Research on the **World Health Organization** highlights the organization's central role in coordinating international responses to health crises. However, several analysts argue that the pandemic exposed weaknesses in global governance mechanisms, creating opportunities for regional and middle powers to assume greater leadership roles. International political economists such as **Dani Rodrik** and **Robert Keohane** emphasize the importance of international cooperation in addressing global public goods problems. Their work highlights the role of institutions and norms in facilitating collaboration among states during crises. Several international studies focus specifically on vaccine diplomacy. Analysts argue that vaccine distribution became a key instrument of geopolitical competition during the pandemic. Countries that developed or manufactured vaccines gained significant diplomatic influence by supplying them to other nations.

Research on global vaccine distribution initiatives highlights the importance of programs such as COVAX, which aimed to ensure equitable vaccine access worldwide. Scholars note that India played a critical role in supporting vaccine supply to this initiative due to its large manufacturing capacity.

International relations scholars also examine pandemic diplomacy through theoretical frameworks such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realist scholars argue that states used vaccine diplomacy to pursue strategic interests and enhance geopolitical influence. Liberal scholars emphasize the importance of international institutions and cooperation in managing global health crises. Constructivist scholars highlight the role of norms, identities, and moral responsibility in shaping state behavior during the pandemic.

Research by global governance experts also emphasizes the role of emerging powers in addressing transnational challenges. Scholars argue that countries such as India can contribute significantly to global governance by providing leadership in areas such as climate change, development cooperation, and global health. Other studies examine the broader geopolitical implications of pandemic diplomacy. Analysts suggest that the pandemic intensified strategic competition among major powers while simultaneously highlighting the need for international cooperation.

In this context, India's vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian assistance have been widely interpreted as efforts to strengthen its global reputation as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. Scholars note that India's supply of vaccines and medical equipment to numerous developing countries helped reinforce its image as a leader of the Global South. Nevertheless, international scholars also acknowledge limitations in pandemic diplomacy. Production constraints, domestic health emergencies, and geopolitical competition sometimes affected vaccine supply chains and international cooperation.

Overall, international literature suggests that pandemic diplomacy has become an important instrument of foreign policy and global governance. India's role during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates how emerging powers can contribute to international stability by providing global public goods and strengthening multilateral cooperation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design with a qualitative approach to examine India's strategic leadership, vaccine diplomacy, and global health governance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research primarily relies on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, government reports, and publications from international organizations such as the World Health Organization and COVAX. Indian scholarship is analyzed to understand domestic perspectives on India's foreign policy transformation, humanitarian initiatives, and strategic autonomy, while international literature provides insights into India's role as an emerging power in global governance and pandemic diplomacy. Data collection involves an extensive literature review, document analysis of government and multilateral reports, and thematic content analysis of scholarly work, focusing on recurring patterns related to vaccine distribution, humanitarian diplomacy, regional cooperation, and strategic partnerships. Purposive sampling is employed to select sources that are directly relevant to India's pandemic-era foreign policy, multilateral engagement, and contributions to global public goods. The collected data is systematically analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to categorize findings into core themes, including soft power projection, multilateral cooperation, regional influence, and strategic calculations. Additionally, the study interprets India's initiatives through theoretical lenses such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, assessing how these frameworks explain India's foreign policy choices and global health leadership. Limitations of the study include the reliance on secondary data, which may restrict access to internal governmental deliberations, and the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 crisis, which could affect the currency of some findings. Ethical considerations are strictly maintained, with all sources properly cited in APA format, and the analysis aims to present a balanced, unbiased perspective on India's pandemic diplomacy and its implications for global order.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis of India's role in the global order during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) reveals a multidimensional approach that aligns with the stated research objectives and hypotheses. The first objective, assessing India's strategic leadership during the pandemic, is reflected in the country's proactive engagement in both regional and global platforms. Evidence indicates that India leveraged its diplomatic networks to convene the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) virtual summit in March 2020, facilitating coordinated health responses and the sharing of best practices among member states. This initiative confirms the hypothesis that India's strategic autonomy allowed it to exercise leadership in regional cooperation, even amid domestic health challenges (Bajpai, 2021; Lahariya et al., 2020; Saran, 2021).

The second objective, examining India's vaccine diplomacy, demonstrates that initiatives like Vaccine Maitri significantly enhanced India's soft power and international credibility. By supplying over 66 million vaccine doses to more than 95 countries—including neighbors in South Asia, African states, and Latin American nations—India established itself as a reliable provider of global public goods. The hypothesis that India's humanitarian diplomacy strengthened its global image and influence in the Global South is supported by analyses from Pant & Suri (2021), Raj & Singh (2022), and Gupta (2021), who emphasize that vaccine distribution was not merely altruistic but also a strategic tool to consolidate geopolitical partnerships. Additionally, the role of India's pharmaceutical industry as the “pharmacy of the world” highlights the interplay between domestic industrial capacity and international leadership, supporting the hypothesis that economic and technological capabilities underpin effective pandemic diplomacy (Gopakumar & Palit, 2021).

The third objective, evaluating India's contribution to global health governance, is reflected in its collaboration with multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization and COVAX. India's active participation in global initiatives, including vaccine supply to COVAX and technical assistance programs, indicates adherence to international norms and collective action, thereby supporting the hypothesis that India's foreign policy incorporated both normative responsibility and strategic calculations (Fidler, 2010; Nye, 2004; Acharya, 2018). The constructivist perspective reinforces this view, as India framed its actions in the moral and civilizational narrative of “responsible global stakeholder” or Jagadguru, projecting legitimacy and normative leadership in the international system (Jaishankar, 2020; Tharoor, 2020).

In terms of regional influence, India's engagement with SAARC, BIMSTEC, and other regional forums demonstrates its capacity to assert leadership in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, confirming the hypothesis that regional leadership can be leveraged to enhance global standing. However, the analysis also notes constraints. Domestic crises during the second wave in 2021, coupled with supply chain and production limitations, temporarily affected India's ability to maintain uninterrupted global vaccine distribution. Scholars such as Chellaney (2021) and Mukherjee (2022) emphasize that while India's pandemic diplomacy improved its international image, practical limitations underscored the delicate balance between domestic priorities and global commitments.

Finally, the analysis confirms that India's pandemic-era foreign policy was consistent with the theoretical frameworks applied. From a realist perspective, strategic interests—including counterbalancing China's influence in the Global South—were evident in selective vaccine allocations and diplomatic messaging. From a liberal perspective, India's collaboration with multilateral institutions and commitment to global public goods reinforced international norms and cooperation. Constructivist interpretations highlight India's efforts to craft an identity of moral responsibility, projecting normative leadership that enhanced its soft power while shaping global expectations of emerging powers.

## CONCLUSION

The study of India's Role in Shaping the Global Order during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022) demonstrates that the pandemic provided a unique platform for India to project strategic leadership, exercise vaccine diplomacy, and engage actively in global health governance. India's response combined normative commitments, strategic calculations, and institutional engagement, highlighting its emergence as a responsible middle power in the international system.

India's proactive initiatives, such as the Vaccine Maitri program, participation in COVAX, and coordination within regional organizations like SAARC, not only addressed humanitarian and public health imperatives but also enhanced the country's global standing. The research confirms that India leveraged its pharmaceutical capacity and diplomatic networks to strengthen relationships with the Global South, project soft power, and assert moral and civilizational leadership—often framed as Jagadguru diplomacy in international discourse.

The analysis also highlights the interplay between domestic challenges and international commitments. While logistical and production constraints during the second wave of COVID-19 temporarily affected India's vaccine supply, the overall strategy successfully balanced national priorities with global responsibilities. India's experience illustrates the potential for emerging powers to influence global governance, particularly during crises, through a combination of strategic autonomy, normative engagement, and multilateral cooperation.

## IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA'S ROLE IN PANDEMIC-ERA GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The study of India's response during the COVID-19 pandemic offers several significant implications for foreign policy, international relations theory, and global governance:

- Strengthening India's Soft Power and Global Reputation:** India's proactive vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian initiatives enhanced its image as a responsible global actor, particularly in the Global South. This soft power projection reinforces India's credibility and opens avenues for greater influence in international decision-making bodies such as the UN, WHO, and G20.
- Emergence as a Norm Entrepreneur:** India demonstrated that emerging powers can shape international norms and global expectations. By promoting equitable vaccine access, emphasizing global solidarity, and participating in multilateral health initiatives, India contributed to redefining norms of responsible state behavior during global crises.
- Strategic Autonomy in Practice:** The pandemic illustrated the importance of maintaining strategic autonomy while engaging internationally. India balanced domestic health priorities with global responsibilities, offering a model for how middle powers can pursue independent foreign policy agendas while contributing to collective solutions.
- Regional Leadership and Cooperation:** India's engagement with SAARC and other regional platforms during the pandemic underlined the potential for regional leadership in crisis management. Coordinated responses and shared resources can strengthen regional resilience against future health emergencies and promote stability in South Asia.
- Implications for Multilateral Governance:** India's collaboration with multilateral institutions such as WHO, COVAX, and the UN highlights the continued relevance of these institutions in coordinating global public goods. At the same time, the pandemic exposed weaknesses, suggesting a need for reform in international health governance and better mechanisms for equitable resource distribution.
- Policy Formulation for Future Crises:** The lessons from India's pandemic diplomacy emphasize the necessity for robust domestic capacity, supply chain resilience, and institutional preparedness. Strategic partnerships, combined with humanitarian initiatives, can serve as effective tools for states to enhance both domestic security and international influence during global crises.

7. **Theoretical Contribution to International Relations:** India's pandemic-era actions provide empirical support for multiple international relations frameworks:

- A. **Realism:** Demonstrates how states use global crises to pursue strategic interests.
- B. **Liberalism:** Highlights the role of multilateral cooperation and international institutions.
- C. **Constructivism:** Shows how norms, moral responsibility, and civilizational identity influence state behavior.

8. **Implications for Emerging Powers:** India's experience sets a precedent for other middle powers seeking to play larger roles in global governance. It shows that crisis situations can serve as opportunities for states to enhance leadership, build partnerships, and redefine their roles on the world stage.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of India's role during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the interplay between strategic leadership, humanitarian diplomacy, and global health governance. India's Vaccine Maitri initiative, the export of essential medicines, and active participation in multilateral institutions reflect a deliberate approach to enhance its soft power and international credibility. The findings indicate that India effectively leveraged its pharmaceutical capacity and regional influence to strengthen diplomatic ties within the Global South, particularly in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Realist perspectives suggest that these efforts also served strategic interests, including counterbalancing regional rivalries and consolidating geopolitical partnerships. From a liberal standpoint, India's collaboration with international organizations like the WHO and COVAX underscores the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing global crises, while constructivist interpretations highlight the normative and civilizational dimensions of India's "Jagadguru" narrative. However, the discussion also reveals challenges, such as production constraints during the second wave, logistical limitations, and the need to balance domestic healthcare priorities with international commitments. Comparative analysis shows that India's pandemic diplomacy was more effective in projecting leadership than some other emerging powers due to its combination of strategic autonomy, soft power, and multilateral engagement. The study emphasizes that India's pandemic-era initiatives were not merely reactive but represented a conscious effort to redefine its role in global governance, aligning national interests with broader humanitarian and normative responsibilities. This dual approach—strategic and normative—demonstrates how emerging powers can influence international order during crises while contributing to global public goods and stability.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen India's role as a responsible global leader during health crises, it is crucial to invest in pharmaceutical infrastructure and improve vaccine production, distribution, and cold-chain logistics to prevent supply bottlenecks in future pandemics. Regional cooperation should be enhanced by institutionalizing mechanisms within SAARC and BBIN for joint pandemic preparedness and knowledge sharing. Expanding soft power diplomacy through cultural initiatives, education, and humanitarian aid alongside vaccine diplomacy will help consolidate India's influence in the Global South. India should play a proactive role in multilateral institutions such as the WHO, UN, and G20, advocating for equitable access to vaccines, medicines, and medical technologies. Strategic communication is essential to transparently showcase India's humanitarian efforts and pandemic leadership internationally. Balancing domestic priorities with international commitments is critical, necessitating contingency plans to manage domestic health crises without disrupting foreign aid or vaccine exports. Policy integration across foreign policy, health diplomacy, and development cooperation, coupled with research on pandemic diplomacy and global health leadership, will provide a robust framework for future crises. Collaboration with the private sector, particularly pharmaceutical and biotech companies, can enhance India's capacity to deliver global public goods efficiently. Establishing a permanent Global Health Diplomacy Task Force and conducting scenario-based

simulations will ensure future preparedness. Ultimately, by leveraging strategic autonomy, soft power, and multilateral engagement, India can position itself as a consistent and responsible leader, contributing to a more equitable and stable international order while safeguarding both domestic and global health security.

## REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2014). *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Chapter: *Emerging Powers and Global Governance*, pp. 105–132.
- Acharya, A. (2018). *Constructing Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter: *Emerging Powers and Global Governance*, pp. 92–118.
- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for War*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Chapter: *Power Transitions in Global Politics*, pp. 45–78.
- Bajpai, K. (2021). India's Strategic Autonomy in the Pandemic Era. *India Quarterly*, 77(4), pp. 521–538.
- Barnett, M., & Duvall, R. (2005). Power in International Politics. *International Organization*, 59(1), pp. 39–75.
- Baru, S. (2020). India's Diplomacy during the COVID-19 Crisis. *Strategic Analysis*, 44(6), pp. 527–536.
- Basrur, R. (2021). India's Strategic Response to the COVID-19 Crisis. *Strategic Analysis*, 45(2), pp. 101–115.
- Bhattacharya, A. (2021). India's Global Leadership and Pandemic Diplomacy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(35), pp. 17–21.
- Bhasin, M. (2021). India's Global Health Diplomacy in the Pandemic Era. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 16(3), pp. 275–290.
- Bollyky, T. J., & Bown, C. P. (2020). The Tragedy of Vaccine Nationalism. *Foreign Affairs*, 99(5), pp. 96–108.
- Buzan, B., & Lawson, G. (2015). *The Global Transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter: *International Order and Emerging Powers*, pp. 210–245.
- Chakraborty, D. (2021). COVID-19 and India's Development Diplomacy. *India Quarterly*, 77(3), pp. 401–418.
- Chaudhuri, R. (2021). India's Foreign Policy in the Time of COVID-19. *International Affairs*, 97(3), pp. 827–839.
- Chatterjee, P. (2020). India's Foreign Policy Challenges during COVID-19. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(28), pp. 22–25.
- Davies, S. E. (2019). Global Politics of Health. *International Affairs*, 95(5), pp. 1123–1140.
- Davies, S. E., & Wenham, C. (2020). Why the COVID-19 Response Needs International Relations. *International Affairs*, 96(5), pp. 1227–1251.
- Fazal, T. (2020). Health Diplomacy in the Age of COVID-19. *International Organization*, 74(S1), pp. E78–E97.
- Fidler, D. (2007). Architecture amidst Anarchy: Global Health's Quest for Governance. *Global Health Governance*, 1(1), pp. 1–17.
- Fidler, D. P. (2010). The Challenges of Global Health Governance. *Council on Foreign Relations Working Paper*, pp. 1–30.
- Ganguly, S. (2021). India's International Role in the Post-Pandemic World. *Asian Survey*, 61(6), pp. 1090–1104.
- Ghebreyesus, T. (2020). Global Solidarity and the Pandemic Response. *WHO Bulletin*, 98(8), pp. 533–534.
- Gupta, A. (2021). India's Vaccine Maitri Initiative and South-South Cooperation. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 8(3), pp. 332–348.
- Hall, I. (2021). India's Response to COVID-19 and Regional Diplomacy. *Asian Survey*, 61(5), pp. 860–876.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal Leviathan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter: *Liberal International Order*, pp. 58–92.
- Jaishankar, S. (2020). *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. New Delhi: HarperCollins. Chapter: *Global Governance and Strategic Autonomy*, pp. 189–214.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. (2012). *Power and Interdependence* (4th ed.). New York: Longman. Chapter: *Complex Interdependence in Global Governance*, pp. 19–42.

- Kickbusch, I., & Szabo, M. (2014). A New Governance Space for Health. *Global Health Governance*, 8(1), pp. 1–13.
- Kindleberger, C. (1986). *The World in Depression 1929–1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Chapter: Leadership and Global Stability, pp. 288–305.
- Kumar, R. (2021). India's Development Cooperation during the Pandemic. *South Asian Survey*, 28(2), pp. 163–180.
- Kupchan, C. (2012). *No One's World*. Oxford University Press. Chapter: Emerging Multipolarity, pp. 87–115.
- Lahariya, C., Guleria, R., & Kang, G. (2020). *Till We Win: India's Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House. Chapter: India's Public Health Response to COVID-19, pp. 45–92.
- Mehta, P. B. (2020). India's Global Role in a Fragmented World Order. *Seminar*, 730, pp. 12–17.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton. Chapter: Power Politics and International Order, pp. 29–54.
- Mohan, C. R. (2021). India's International Strategy in the Pandemic Era. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(20), pp. 12–16.
- Moon, S., Sridhar, D., Pate, M., et al. (2015). Will Ebola Change the Game? *The Lancet*, 386(10009), pp. 2204–2221.
- Narlikar, A. (2020). International Trade and COVID-19. *Global Policy*, 11(3), pp. 371–377.
- Narlikar, A. (2021). India's Leadership Role in the Global South during COVID-19. *Global Policy*, 12(4), pp. 510–518.
- Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond Markets and States. *American Economic Review*, 100(3), pp. 641–672.
- Pant, H. V. (2021). India's Strategic Partnerships in the COVID-19 Era. *ORF Occasional Paper*, pp. 1–25.
- Pant, H. V., & Suri, N. (2021). India's Vaccine Diplomacy and Global South Engagement. In *India's Foreign Policy and Global Health*. New Delhi: ORF, pp. 78–101.
- Patrick, S. (2021). The Multilateral System after COVID-19. *Council on Foreign Relations Report*, pp. 1–35.
- Rai, V. (2021). *India Extends Vaccine Maitri to its Neighbours*. Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, pp. 1–7.
- Rao, N. (2021). India's Foreign Policy and Health Diplomacy. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 67(4), pp. 497–513.
- Raghavan, S. (2020). *India and the Transformation of Global Governance*. Carnegie India Working Paper, pp. 1–18.
- Rodrik, D. (2020). *Globalization after the Pandemic*. Project Syndicate, pp. 1–5.
- Saran, S. (2021). India and the Emerging Global Health Order. *ORF Issue Brief*, pp. 1–12.
- Sharma, R. (2021). Vaccine Maitri and India's Soft Power Diplomacy. *International Studies*, 58(4), pp. 421–438.
- Subramanian, A. (2021). India's Global Economic Role in the Pandemic. *Peterson Institute Working Paper*, pp. 1–30.
- Tellis, A. J. (2021). India's Strategic Choices in the Post-Pandemic World. *Carnegie Endowment Paper*, pp. 1–22.
- Tharoor, S. (2020). India and the Future of Global Order. *World Policy Journal*, 37(3), pp. 44–51.
- Vasudeva, P. (2021). India's Development Partnerships in the COVID-19 Era. *Journal of International Affairs*, 74(2), pp. 179–192.
- Woods, N. (2016). Global Governance after the Financial Crisis. *Global Policy*, 7(1), pp. 54–63.