

## India Extends ‘Vaccine Maitri’ to its Neighbours

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### Summary

*New Delhi has leveraged its core strength of being the world’s largest vaccine producer by supplying about six million doses of Covishield, the COVID-19 vaccine produced by Serum Institute of India in partnership with Oxford-AstraZenica, to nine countries in different parts of the world. In launching its own vaccine diplomacy programme, ‘Vaccine Maitri’ or ‘Vaccine Friendship’, the Indian government has committed to supply 10 million doses to countries around the globe. Separately, it has also proposed to supply 200 million doses to the Covax initiative started by the United Nations Security Council. This is in parallel with its own target of vaccinating 300 million persons by July 2021. The initiative has earned the Indian government rare praise.*

In what appears to be a well-crafted and deeply thought-out diplomatic initiative in its neighbourhood, India’s decision to supply the COVID-19 vaccine, in response to requests, is premised on its role as a pivotal global vaccine supplier. In a video conference with leaders of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation countries in March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had proposed a series of initiatives to tackle the pandemic, the first signs of which were just beginning to play out in the South Asian region. Modi had proposed the setting up of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund, offering to contribute an initial amount of US\$10 million (S\$13.3 million). He had also proposed organising a rapid response team of doctors and specialists to help design a disease surveillance information system.

India is largely acknowledged as a global vaccine supplier. It meets roughly 60 per cent of the global demand for vaccine. It also caters to 20 per cent of the global production of generic medicines. In response to a request by [then-United States President Donald Trump](#) to release supplies of hydroxychloroquine (HCl) as a possible treatment for respiratory disease, India had shipped 50 million tablets in May 2020. It has continued to supply HCl and other essential medicines produced in India such as Remdesivir and Paracetamol to other countries. These supplies were taking place on both humanitarian and commercial basis. In the context of the current pandemic, the Indian government has informed the United Nations Security Council that it proposes to supply 200 million doses of the vaccine to the Covax facility of the World Health Organization (WHO) in a phased manner. Covax is the global initiative to ensure rapid and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for all countries, regardless of income levels. India has already supplied six million doses to nine countries in different parts of the globe. Its mass production capability has prompted Peter Piot, Director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases, to say, [“Without India, there won’t be enough vaccines to save the world.”](#)

The Serum Institute of India, ranked India’s number one biotechnology company, manufactures highly specialised life-saving biologicals like vaccines using cutting edge genetic- and cell- based technologies. It is the world’s largest vaccine manufacturer by number of doses produced and sold globally – more than 1.5 billion doses, which include

Polio vaccine as well as Diphtheria, Tetanus, Measles, Mumps and Rubella. In comparison, the United Kingdom's largest manufacturer, GlaxoSmithKline, manufactures 690 million doses while Sanofi of France makes one million doses. Vaccines manufactured by the Serum Institute are accredited by the WHO and is being used in 170 countries across the globe in their national immunisation programmes. The British-Swedish biopharmaceutical giant AstraZenica and Oxford University jointly developed a COVID-19 vaccine, Covishield, which is being produced in India by the Serum Institute. The low-cost and easily storable Covishield vaccine is in huge demand in developing countries struggling to vaccinate their population. The Pune-based vaccine manufacturer has already stockpiled 80 million doses of Covishield and is churning out 50 million doses a month. Another vaccine manufacturing company, Bharat Biotech, has also received approval for India's first indigenous COVID-19 vaccine, Covaxin. This company has also been ramping up production to meet the expected unprecedented demand. Thus, India is set to be at the forefront of supplying affordable shots against COVID-19 to low- and middle-income countries.

The Indian government has given its diplomatic initiative its own hashtag, 'Vaccine Maitri' or 'Vaccine Friendship'. Based on its core strength of science and pharmaceuticals, New Delhi's initiative is designed towards building its image and soft power, especially in the South Asian region where it appeared to be losing pre-eminence to aggressive Chinese ambitions. The government seems to have done well in grabbing the occasion for a diplomatic initiative when the window of opportunity presented itself. While driving the world's largest vaccination programme, by vaccinating about 300 million of its own citizens by July 2021, (it vaccinated two million persons in nine days), the government is committed to nursing its neighbourhood back to health by donating about 10 million doses. It has delivered two million doses to Bangladesh, one million to Nepal, 150,000 to Bhutan, 100,000 to the Maldives, 1.5 million to Myanmar and 50,000 to Seychelles. Supplies to Morocco and Afghanistan are in the pipeline. Beyond the Asian region, the country has contracted to supply two million doses each to Brazil and Morocco. There are pending requests from South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. The popularity of the Indian vaccine arises from the fact that it is safe and cheap, being priced at US\$6 (S\$8), as against US\$30 (S\$40) for the Moderna vaccine.

This initiative of the Indian government led to [Bhutan Prime Minister Lotay Tshering](#) stating, "It is of unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting your own needs, as opposed to giving out only after you have enough." India hopes that the 'vaccine diplomacy', which is helping its neighbours to combat the pandemic, will help India further its goodwill and in some ways counter the aggressive manner in which Chinese investments have been creating deeper influence in the region.

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