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India-ASEAN Vaccine Resilience: The Way Forward

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy* and Kingshuk Saha**

India's humane attitude has brought it to the forefront in the fight against Covid-19. While 1.3 billion are looking to be vaccinated, India has also launched its vaccine outreach through an initiative called 'Vaccine Maitri' (Vaccine Friendship). Days after it began vaccinating its population, India has begun dispatching millions of doses of Covid-19 vaccines to its neighbours and key partner countries. While India attaches great importance to its partnership with ASEAN countries, its actions are relatively less visible in the region. Perhaps, India's Act East Policy needs a sincere recast on ways to improve India's partnership.

1. Introduction

India and many other countries around the globe are at a critical point in their fight against Covid-19. The hard work of the scientific community and their dedication to finding a solution to the ongoing pandemic has resulted in the arrival and rolling out of vaccine in many countries, perhaps a final means toward the eradication of the Covid-19. India, also known as the pharmacy of the world, has always been guided by the philosophy of “*sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu nirāmayāḥ*” (May all living beings be at peace, may no one suffer from illness). This is evident from India's approach and actions to counter the devastating pandemic. Understanding India's unique philosophy, the Indian government acknowledged the imperatives of collaborations. Moreover, India's humane attitude has brought it to the forefront of the fight against Covid-19. It has not only supplied indispensable medicines and medical devices to many countries in need but also extended its steady support in global efforts to deal with pandemics.

With the development of the indigenous vaccine by companies such as Zydus, Bharat Biotech, and Gennova, India has started the world's largest Covid-19 vaccination drive. The most promising two Covid-19 vaccines are the made-in-India Covaxin (by Bharat Biotech) and Covishield (by Serum Institute in international collaboration with

* Adjunct Senior Associate Fellow, Asian Confluence, New Delhi

** Bangalore based independent researcher

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AstraZeneca).¹ While billion plus Indians are being vaccinated in a phased manner, India has also launched its vaccine outreach through an initiative called '*Vaccine Maitri*' (Vaccine Friendship). It has begun dispatching millions of doses of its indigenously manufactured Covid-19 vaccines to neighbours and partner countries across the globe.² The sheer size, scale and swiftness of the programme have been setting an example of India's selflessness and humane approach and has been appreciated all over the world. India attaches great importance to her partnership with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, giving the highest importance to 'ASEAN centrality' as an essential anchor for regional development, peace and stability in the region. However, ASEAN is less visible in India's Vaccine Matri Initiative. Therefore, ASEAN and India must reinforce their partnerships when Covid-19 is seen as the most important challenge by ASEAN countries as well as India.

2. India's Vaccine Maitri

As rich countries are hoarding vaccine,³ the developing countries are struggling to inoculate their people⁴. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said: "progress on vaccinations has been wildly uneven and unfair, with just 10 countries having administered 75 per cent of all vaccines". He emphasized that "more than 130 countries have not received a single dose. At this critical moment, vaccine equity is the biggest moral test before the global community"⁵. India has been at the forefront of the war against the pandemic. India, guided by its civilizational ethos which has extolled the virtue of cooperation and harmony with fellow human being, has been the spirit behind India's Vaccine Maitri. India leveraging its strength as the largest vaccines and generic medicines producer has provided medical assistance to over 150 countries.⁶ Further, India is not only leading the world's largest Covid-19 vaccination drive but also sharing the vaccine with the rest of the world with neighbours and friends getting preference. For example, Myanmar has received 1.5 million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine by India in the first vaccine batch to inoculate 750,000 people.⁷ India will send 100,000 doses to Cambodia in the first batch. Cambodia has placed an additional request for 5 million doses of vaccine. Foreign Affairs Minister Prak Sokhonn observed, "the two countries have enjoyed a history of close relations and Cambodian people trust Indian medical care and health services, which are affordable and efficient".⁸ Thailand is in talks with India about the vaccine. India's Ambassador Suchitra Durai said "India and Thailand have close and friendly relations and many countries across the world, including many in Southeast Asia, have opted to purchase our vaccines. Thailand is also welcome to do so and that the Indian Embassy would be happy to facilitate it".⁹ These are some illustrations of India's ongoing collaboration with ASEAN countries. India's actions in its eastern neighbourhood, however, are less visible.

3. Interconnectedness and Enhanced Cooperation

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the deaths of millions across the world with a paradigm shift on the global political and economic landscape. In these challenging times, it is pertinent for India-ASEAN to enhance cooperation and interconnectedness to take on the multifaced

challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This collaboration would immensely benefit all stakeholders. India and ASEAN have already existing mechanisms for cooperation in joint research and development on health, communicable and emerging infectious diseases.¹⁰ The need of the hour is for all stakeholders to develop a coherent policy to share knowledge, resources and experience. An open and transparent platform is needed to disseminate timely information about safety measures to be followed and about vaccination. Enhancing collaboration between scientist, doctors, health workers and policymakers is equally important to share and learn from each other best practices in controlling and mitigating the pandemic. The Covid-19 has resulted in the most severe economic slowdown in living history.¹¹ It is important to revive trade and commerce to bring back livelihoods. India-ASEAN needs to deepen existing business relationships and create new opportunities by the elimination of non-tariff barriers, services liberalization, SMEs cooperation and promotion. India is working to improve connectivity with the ASEAN countries through India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and its further extension to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam.¹² To promote and strengthen the economic ties between India and ASEAN countries, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) with support from the ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC) has organised the Virtual India-ASEAN Healthcare Trade Fair on February 22 to 24, 2021.¹³ Datuk Ramesh Kodammal Co-chairman of ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC) said, “The trade fair will be a good opportunity for ASEAN companies to explore business deals with India, and consequently contribute towards strengthening the economic and commercial partnerships between the healthcare, medical devices, and pharmaceutical sectors of the two regions”.

4. Act East: Time for a Sincere Reflection

At a time when India’s vaccine outreach has been applauded by many countries, it has also boosted India’s credibility as a reliable and cost-effective vaccine producer. It is anticipated that India’s Vaccine Maitri initiative, helping with the low-cost vaccine, easier to store and transport, will enhance Covid-19 vaccine accessibility, particularly to low and middle-income countries, and thus help to address the ‘vaccine inequality’ in the region and beyond to some extent. When ASEAN countries are exploring various options to get access to the Covid-19 vaccine, India needs to inject more energy to extend its support to Southeast Asian partner countries. It becomes more important as China presents a tough challenge for India in this region. Though the quality and efficacy of Chinese vaccines have been questioned by some due to the concealment of test data and lack of transparency in information¹⁴, China’s huge presence and influence will be instrumental in vaccine distribution. The ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in its annual survey on *The State of Southeast Asia* found that threats to health from Covid-19 are the most pressing concern for the region. In a response to which ASEAN dialogue partner has provided the most help to the region for Covid-19, China stands out. In terms of provision of Covid-19 related assistance, 44.2 per cent pick China, followed by Japan (18.2 per cent) and the European Union (10.3 per cent) as providing most help to the region. India’s contribution is less than 2 per cent.¹⁵ Perhaps, it is time for introspection of our ‘Act East’ policy and despite India’s political commitments and

guidelines, why we are unable to reap the benefits of India's long track record of vaccine manufacture and distribution needs adequately. We need to double our efforts and seriously engage with ASEAN partners for a sustainable and resilient relationship.

Endnotes:

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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.



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Contact us at:

ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)
Research and Information System of Developing Countries (RIS)
Zone-IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003, India
Tel. +91-11-24682177-80
Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: aic@ris.org.in; durairaj@ris.org.in

<http://aic.ris.org.in>



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