

# China-India Brief

*A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation*



*Guest Column*

## China and India's Vaccine Diplomacy: Views from Southeast Asia

By Ian Tsung-yen Chen

In late 2019, the world bore witness to the emergence of an enigmatic new virus in Wuhan, China. Subsequently named COVID-19, the new contagion swiftly spread across the globe afflicting both developed and developing nations. Most advanced economies were able to expedite the development of effective vaccines and successfully curb the spread of the virus within their borders. Developing nations however, grappled with the

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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formidable challenge of procuring COVID-19 vaccines from international sources. Their predicament was exacerbated by a global shortage of top-tier vaccines from the West, prompting them to pivot their efforts towards emerging major powers that had also developed their own vaccines, albeit with concerns regarding their effectiveness and efficacy. At the pandemic's zenith, COVID-19 vaccines emerged as vital strategic assets. Consequently, the pandemic presented a unique opening for influential nations such as China and India to extend their sphere of influence in Southeast Asia through a strategy commonly referred to as "vaccine diplomacy." This approach encompassed the donation and sale of pharmaceuticals as a means of enhancing their own soft power, as well as cultivating robust strategic partnerships within the region.

Southeast Asian nations found themselves ensnared by the intricate web of vaccine diplomacy. This was precipitated not only by the grievous loss of life inflicted by the virus, but also by the stark reality that most governments in the region had limited access to Western-developed vaccines. Consequently, these nations were compelled to explore other options such as purchasing or accepting donations of vaccines from China and India, presenting these two major powers with the strategic opportunity to employ vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic's apex in the region. It is important to acknowledge that each Southeast Asian country responded differently to the overtures extended by

China and India in the context of vaccine partnerships. Several factors, including capacity, credibility and strategic complexity—each played a decisive role in accounting for the disparities in their responses.

Singapore, Cambodia, and Myanmar serve as illuminating case studies showcasing how a combination of these factors gave rise to unique vaccine partnerships tailored to their specific national interests.

### **Capacity, Credibility, and Strategic Complexity**

First, the capacity of each country's public health infrastructure and financial resources played an important role in determining how much they had to rely on external support from China and India. Singapore, with its robust healthcare system, strong financial footing, as well as secured access to Western vaccines, was less dependent on assistance from these two countries.

Conversely, Cambodia and Myanmar, which grappled with resource limitations and underdeveloped health systems, were more reliant on largesse from Beijing and New Delhi, both of which, either donated large quantities of vaccines and medical equipment, or sold them at more affordable prices.

Second, perceived credibility and level of public trust exerted a pronounced influence on vaccine preferences. In Cambodia, where China's economic influence was viewed favourably, Chinese vaccines were embraced with relatively uncritical



enthusiasm. On the other hand, Singapore’s government authorities and social elites displayed a general lack of confidence in both Chinese and Indian vaccines, resulting in a clear preference for Western options. In Myanmar, a general distrust of Chinese economic and political influence in the region, as well as a more favorable perception of India, could have influenced the previous Aung San Suu Kyi government’s decision to rely chiefly on Indian vaccines during the early phase of the pandemic.

Third, pre-existing strategic alignments played a pivotal role in shaping these partnerships. Cambodia’s deep economic interdependence and close security ties with China naturally positioned Beijing as the preferred partner when the pandemic hit. Singapore, renowned for its diplomatic prowess and maintaining equidistance between all major powers, enjoyed greater flexibility to choose who it wanted to form

partnerships with. As such, it prioritised countries like the United States and Germany that were producing the most effective vaccines, rather than China or India. In Myanmar’s case, the former democratic government’s interest in deepening ties with India—a country with rising political and strategic influence in the region, and a potential balance to China—may have cemented the country’s initial decision to use Indian vaccines.

Interestingly, domestic political transitions could also precipitate realignments in health partnerships as regimes underwent change. Following the military takeover in February 2021, Myanmar’s vaccine partnership preference underwent an almost overnight shift from India to China. The decision was made by the military junta and was indicative of the new regime’s political priorities—to ingratiate itself with Beijing—rather than any considerations grounded in medical science. In stark contrast,

Cambodia, which remained politically stable throughout the pandemic, continued its cooperation with China without interruption.

Finally, the extent of engagement was contingent on the interplay of these factors in each case. Singapore's engagement with China in the realm of vaccines, despite concerns about credibility, leaned more towards a symbolic partnership driven by diplomatic considerations. This could be categorised as a 'diplomatic partnership.'

Cambodia, given its long-standing alignment with Beijing, forged a comprehensive strategic alliance with China encompassing vaccines and broader cooperation, constituting a 'strategic partnership.' Myanmar's approach, marked by inconsistency and political drivers subject to change, could be characterised as a 'political partnership.'

### **Key Takeaways**

Considering the circumstances outlined in the three aforementioned cases, several noteworthy observations can be made. First, China's image of itself as an effective and benevolent health security partner is not universally shared by all Southeast Asian nations. Contrary to the narrative presented in Beijing's propaganda, Chinese-developed vaccines exhibited lower efficacy rates compared to their Western counterparts, leading governments and citizens in the majority of Southeast Asian countries to express limited trust in their vaccines.

Furthermore, Beijing's opaque vaccine approval process and perceived pressure on other governments to procure Chinese vaccines for geopolitical reasons, rather than out of medical necessity, further eroded its credibility. Over the course of the pandemic, Beijing only succeeded in strengthening relations with states like Cambodia, which already had pre-existing strategic dependencies on China. Thus, Beijing derived minimal soft power benefits from its vaccine outreach efforts.

Second, strategic relationships established prior to the pandemic significantly influenced choices made in health partnerships. For instance, given Phnom Penh's pronounced strategic and economic dependence on Beijing, it was only natural for China to become Cambodia's primary health partner during the pandemic. Singapore and Myanmar on the other hand, were more cautious of China and sought to avoid excessive dependence on Beijing. Singapore accepted some vaccines from China out of diplomatic courtesy, but relied predominantly on Western vaccines, reflecting its posture of balancing between the United States and China. Myanmar displayed a clear preference for India initially, and only shifted to China due to the junta's growing political isolation. These observations show that preferences for health security partners are influenced by the state of strategic relations between the involved parties, and can evolve as geopolitical dynamics change.

Third, it is noteworthy that while Indian vaccines boast Western origins, they have not garnered widespread interest among Southeast Asian countries. This phenomenon may be attributed to their commercial orientation, as well as the fact that a significant portion of Indian vaccines were channeled into accredited global donation networks rather than distributed through bilateral channels. Its self-imposed vaccine export ban between April and October 2021—during the peak of the worldwide pandemic—also dented India’s credibility as a reliable partner. Notably, Myanmar stands as the singular exception within Southeast Asia, initially aligning with India’s Neighbourhood First Policy and a welcoming recipient of its vaccine diplomacy. However, Myanmar’s preferences were subject to fluctuations due to shifts in domestic politics. This shows that the strategic rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi in Southeast Asia is most conspicuous in Myanmar and may potentially escalate in the foreseeable future.

Lastly, it is imperative to underscore the pivotal influence of domestic politics and governance structures in shaping vaccine alignment strategies. Cambodia’s one-party authoritarian regime facilitated a steady and unwavering alignment with China, devoid of interruptions or substantial debate. In stark contrast, Myanmar’s political landscape, characterised by fluidity and

instability, resulted in an erratic and politically-driven approach that remained susceptible to realignment with each subsequent political transition.

Consequently, it is evident that any gains achieved through vaccine diplomacy may be transitory in nature and could be subject to reversal in the event of significant political changes.

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**This article is based on the author’s paper, “China and India’s COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy and Health Security Partnerships in Southeast Asia,” published in the journal, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. The paper can be accessed [here](#).**

## News Reports

### Bilateral relations

#### **Rajnath Singh to celebrate Dussehra with soldiers in Tawang near Chinese border**

Press Trust of India, October 23

The Indian defence minister, Rajnath Singh, will celebrate Dussehra with the soldiers at the forward base in Arunachal Pradesh, which is closely situated to the Line of Actual Control, and carry out a comprehensive review of the situation on the ground.

#### **China's troop build-up, LAC infrastructure work still on: Pentagon**

Times of India, October 21

In the latest annual report by the Pentagon, it was reported that China had not only failed to reduce its military deployments along the Line of Actual Control but also continued to develop infrastructure along the border and expand its military capabilities.

#### **India to skip China's Belt and Road Forum for a third time**

Deccan Herald, October 16

Consistent in its criticisms of the BRI, in particular of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which seeks to override New Delhi's sovereignty concerns, India is set to boycott China's Belt and Road Forum for the third consecutive year.

### China and India in the Region

#### **Mohamed Muizzu: The Maldives' new president wants India out**

BBC News, October 23

Favouring closer ties with China and distancing itself from the previous India-first policy under the preceding president, Mr Muizzu has declared that "every single Indian military personnel here should be removed."

#### **While the world watched China, India quietly built a naval base in Africa**

Military Africa, October 19

India's newly established naval base in Mauritius will not only allow it to solidify its presence and effectively monitor the Southwest Indian Ocean but also counterbalance China's growing influence in the region.

#### **'Our interests are aligned,' Indian FM Jaishankar declares after meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart**

Wion, October 17

According to the state-run Vietnam News Agency (VNA), both sides reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation and aviation, and compliance with international law in the East Sea, resolving disputes based on international law, especially the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in a veiled reference to China.

## Trade and Economy

**India is a 'slow trundling elephant' but a viable alternative to China, says veteran investor David Roche**

CNBC, October 22

Veteran investor David Roche predicts that India has the potential to leapfrog its Chinese counterpart to become the world's second-largest economy by 2075.

**US beats China to emerge as India's biggest trading partner during first half of FY24**

Livemint, October 22

The two-way trade between India and China dropped by 3.56 percent to US\$ 58.11 billion.

**India, China to contribute half of world growth**

Deccan Chronicle, October 21

India's economy is expected to grow by 6.3 percent in 2023 and 2024, while the Chinese economy is projected to grow at 5 percent in 2023 and 4.2 percent in 2024.

**India's attempt to block use of yuan for oil imports will be to detriment of its own oil companies: experts**

Global Times, October 17

In an "ill-advised" attempt to "economically disengage" with China, India's "discomfort" with the use of yuan for Russian oil import settlements has held up payment for at least seven cargoes, incurring greater operating costs and disrupting normal operations for companies.

## Energy and Environment

**Belt and Road: China's green footprint illuminates a greener future for world**

Xinhua, October 23

China's solar technology giant, LONGi Green Energy Technology Co.Ltd., has begun exporting one-gigawatt PV modules from China to Uzbekistan.

**India Sets up Inter-Ministerial Group For Climate negotiations Strategy**

NDTV, October 17

In preparation for the upcoming COP28 talks in Dubai in December, India has established an inter-ministerial group to promote coordinated and detailed discussion on five main issues – mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, climate finance, and Article 6 of the Paris Agreement.

**China and India struggle to curb fossil fuels**

Reuters, October 16

As both countries are experiencing rapid growth in energy demands, demand for fossil fuels alongside renewable energy sources have increased to become "all of the above" complements rather than substitutes to secure economic development and energy security.

## Analyses

### **Though overlooked, India's border dispute with China is a major flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific**

Scroll.in, October 23

*By Amrita Jash, Assistant Professor at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (Institution of Eminence), India*

Following the recent violent clashes that have erupted between India and China and the lack of progress in resolving the dispute, continued armed co-existence has raised the possibility of conflict, which could undermine the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Breaking down China and India's race to represent the Global South**

Atlantic Council, October 20

*By Hung Tran, Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's GeoEconomics Centre*

From their involvement in the international economic and financial system to the response towards the conflict between Israel and Hamas, both India and China have taken different approaches in their race to define a consensus agenda for the Global South.

### **Dispelling Misconceptions: Why BRI is not a geopolitical tool**

CGTN, October 19

**By Wang Huiyao, President of the Center for China and Globalization.**

Contrary to Western skepticism, the BRI has consistently proved itself as a global public good, facilitating multilateral cooperation and infrastructure development for developing and underdeveloped countries.

### **How India's unspoken strategy to drive out Chinese firms can backfire**

South China Morning Post, October 17

*By Christopher Tang, Distinguished Professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management*

India's legal and bureaucratic measures to deter competition from Chinese firms and build India's domestic manufacturing sector could potentially increase the fiscal burden on the government, cause market inefficiencies, and potentially distort the domestic market.



## Books and Journals

### **India, China and the Strategic Himalayas**

Routledge, 2023

*Edited by Sangeeta Thapliyal, Professor at the Centre for Inner Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

This book analyses strategic discourse on the Himalayas from the perspective of India's interests. Home to many communities, cultures, natural resources and political boundaries, it is the geopolitical landscape of the Himalayas between India and China that dominates other narratives and discourses.

The traditional notion of Himalayas as India's frontiers and buffer is challenged by China. Despite various mechanisms to address border resolution there are violations and transgressions from China. This book examines India's responses to the new emerging challenges in the Himalayas. How the statist discourse on strategic interests incorporates people's discourse. It provides a nuanced understanding of India's strategic undertakings, diplomatic initiatives and development framework.

This book will be a valuable addition to existing knowledge on the Himalayas between India and China. Scholars and practitioners interested in International Relations, Strategic Studies, Himalayan Studies and South Asian Studies will find it useful.



### **INDIA, CHINA AND THE STRATEGIC HIMALAYAS**

Edited by  
Sangeeta Thapliyal



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## THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

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## OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

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- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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