India's COVID-19 Strategy and implications for its relations in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept the world with a state of medical emergency, economic slowdown and health infrastructures challenged by multiple wave sand strains of the mutating virus. Despite a good recovery rate from the COVID-19 infections, India is among the worst affected nations by the pandemic economically and from a security perspective. While New Delhi witnessed worsening relations with its neighbors like China, it introduced several policies to tackle the COVID-19, while handling its international relations with its neighbors in the Indian Ocean and beyond. The paper raises the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the strategic environment for India. How did India respond to the regional challenges under this strategic environment through its COVID-19 strategy and/or diplomacy? The study uses the neoclassical realist concept of permissive/restrictive strategic environment and the role of foreign policy executive (FPE) in shaping foreign policy. The paper argues that COVID-19 proved to be a catalyst for shaping the strategic environment for India as that of imminent threat, leading to a more restrictive strategic environment for the nation, giving it narrower window of options to exercise its COVID-19 diplomacy and build security partnerships. It discusses how India's COVID-19 strategies were catalyst in shaping India's security policies and initiatives in the Indian Ocean region. The paper states that since India faced a restrictive strategic environment internationally, its foreign policy elite remained key actors that influenced India's foreign policy in the Indian Ocean to balance Chinese influence in the region through its COVID-19 diplomacy and strategy for regional engagement.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, India, China, medical diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept the world with a state of medical emergency, economic slowdown and health infrastructures challenged by multiple wave sand strains of the mutating virus. Despite a good recovery rate from the COVID-19 infections, India is among the worst affected nations by the pandemic economically and from a security perspective. The power friction in the Indian Ocean existed before the pandemic hit and continued after the world was engulfed in the COVID-19 health crisis. For India, the pandemic hit at the time when it was facing border security issues with China and Pakistan in the north, maritime challenges in the seas. However, as the pandemic engulfed the world, several states resorted to introducing complete or partial lockdowns and restriction on movement of people and goods for minimizing exposure to the virus, as well as prioritizing domestic consumption needs. While nations like China and India received assistance from other states, they soon entered into a contest of developing their own domestic capabilities- military and health infrastructure. COVID-19 diplomacy emerged as a contest among major powers competing for influence regionally and globally through medical assistance, medical equipment, vaccine rollout etc.

The paper raises the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the strategic environment for India. How did India respond to the regional challenges under this strategic environment, through its COVID-19 strategy and/or diplomacy? This paper uses the neoclassical realist concept of permissive/restrictive strategic environment and the role of foreign policy executive (FPE) in shaping foreign policy. The scope of this paper is limited to India's COVID-19 strategy/diplomacy in year 2020. The paper states that the restrictive strategic environment was created by high opportunities and threats for India during the pandemic. The paper argues that India's COVID-19 strategies were catalyst in shaping India's security policies and initiatives in the Indian Ocean region. The paper employs qualitative examination of India's policies against the coronavirus pandemic as well as its implications for India's foreign policy towards Indian Ocean region.

The paper is divided into six sections- the next one presents the brief theoretical framework of the study, and the third section discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the strategic environment for India. The following two sections discuss how India's COVID-19 diplomacy influenced the nation's policy towards development partnerships and how India's COVID-19 strategy influenced India's policy towards building the nation's capabilities, respectively, followed by the conclusion in the last section. The paper uses the term diplomacy for the dialogue and negotiations held between the foreign policy elite of India and other states; and the term strategy as the act or plan by the foreign policy elite towards the state's security and its interactions with the other states and actors.

2. Theoretical framework

Classical realism dates back to 1939 with *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939* written by E. H. Carr and *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* in 1948 by Hans Morgenthau, which became the key for political realism post-1950s (Carr, 2016; Morgenthau, 2005). Classical realism assumed the flawed nature of humanity which is power hungry and constant struggle among states to increase capabilities due to the anarchic nature of states. The last three decades before the twenty first century saw the emergence of Neorealism (Waltz, 1979) which brought the focus of international relations on the states as the center point rather than individuals.

Within the realist thought, the balance of power theory is based on works of Thucydides, Hobbes and Rousseau, and have been extended into classical realist theory by Carr (1964) and Morgenthau (1963). The theory suggests that possession and concentration of military and material capabilities with the great powers is kept in check and balanced out due to major powers trying to survive and maintain their supremacy in the international system, thus restoring equilibrium. According to Waltz (1979), the international system is under a recurring balancing phenomenon due to shifts in relative distribution of capabilities. The theory, however, fails to accommodate why and how states could choose not to balance against certain powers in the anarchic international system.

Neo classical realism, on the other hand, examines divides power into components to examine whether they challenge strategic national interests, i.e. whether the change in components of power affect the strategic environment for a nation. Opposed to the balance of power theory, the neoclassical realism allows for the possibility of no counterbalancing behavior in the face of rising power if the component of power is not perceived as a threat to immediate national interest.

This paper hypothesizes COVID-19 diplomacy as one such component of power in the face of the pandemic, and evaluates India's foreign policy towards Indian Ocean through the lens of its competition with China for COVID-19 diplomacy in its immediate neighborhood. The neoclassical realism framework enables looking at India's COVID-19 strategy as an outcome of its foreign policy executive's (FPE) perception of the security environment, where a high (low) security competition relates to restrictive (permissive) international environment. The foreign policy executive's perception of security environment during the pandemic is taken as an intervening variable between the distribution pf power in the international system and India's Indian Ocean policy in general.

The assumptions for the foreign policy executive are the same as in Taliaferro et al. (2012, p. 154), i.e. the FPE is the key decision maker, the FPE's key aim is to advance and secure nation's

security or power, FPE's assessments of power (and the subsequent foreign policies) hold significance, and, FPE being the sole foreign policy maker has monopolistic access to strategic intelligence.

The neoclassical realist model here also assumes that FPE have greater clarity about the international system, enemies and the trajectory of power in the long-run, under high security competition (restrictive strategic environment). The implication is that FPE can choose to balance against certain components of another state's power, which are perceived as a greater geostrategic threat as opposed to other non-urgent but possible threats (Taliaferro et al., 2012, p. 196). With this redirection and reallocation of resources to address threat to geostrategic interests by balancing specific power components opposed to relatively less threatened interests, the FPE's foreign policy choices allow it to address geostrategic challenges by adjusting capacities like industrial production.

The pandemic became a local as well as a global issue, and began being tacked like a political and security threat in several nations, as seen is the US-China conflict over the origin of the pandemic (Verma, 2020). The neoclassical realist sees the structures capable of only pushing and shaping state behavior but not determining them or specifying outcomes (Taliaferro et al., 2012, p. 197). Here 'shoving and shaping' implies interaction of structure and (unit-level) states which can resist the 'shoves'. Keeping that in the background, the paper contends that the pandemic also affected the international power structures to a certain extent, but the response to the 'shoves' of these structures varied according to the state policies regarding the pandemic and their foreign policies.

This paper, tests whether and how COVID-19 posed a threat to India's geostrategic interests and evaluates India's foreign policy response such as through medical diplomacy, development-based engagements, economic and territorial sovereignty. The paper evaluates if India's foreign policy became more balancing in nature and expressive of India's ambition to be a greater and more significant power in the world's geopolitical calculations. With China becoming aggressive in seas and borders around India, and the US policy becoming more anti-China, it has instilled security threat for India amid the pandemic aimed at preventing China from achieving regional hegemony even if it includes counterbalancing by allying with the US.

The neoclassical realist approach transcends the limitation of balance of power theory to allow for examination of 'components of power' in a permissive/restrictive strategic environment, given the role of FPE in shaping the foreign policy. The theory could be helpful in explaining how China's direct competitor, India is striving to mark its presence especially in the Indian Ocean region, through diplomatic measures including medical diplomacy, development partnerships and expanding its influence to safeguard its economy, health and security.

3. Effect of the pandemic on the nature of strategic environment for India

The strategic environment for South Asia towards the end of 2019 saw several international security challenges. India and China, with unsettled border issues and border clashes in the past years, were engaged in diplomatic talks and competition over influence in South Asian small nations. Having rejected the China-led Belt and Road initiative over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India and Japan were collaborating over infrastructure building projects in other Indian Ocean nations like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, African nations etc. with varying degrees of success. Indian Ocean nations were receiving infrastructure loans from China as well (Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan, Maldives reclaimed island project etc.) with other Asian powers alleging Beijing's debt-trap policy amid Hambantota port's 99-year lease to China over non-payment of loans.

China had deployed surveillance ships and submarines in the Indian Ocean and heavily militarized South China Sea where it had territorial disputes with ASEAN nations, beside East China Sea dispute with Japan. The US was engaged in trade war with China and its presence had been gradually diminishing before it came joined in with India, Japan and Australia to form the Quadrilateral (Quad) under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision for free movement in maritime routes between the Pacific and Indian Ocean. India, in line with its multi-alignment policy, avoided antagonizing China directly, engaged in Quad and FOIP on one hand, and collaborated with China through the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on the other hand.

Table 1: *India's (nationwide) Lockdowns during COVID-19 Pandemic*

Policies	Duration
Lockdown 1.0	25 March To 14 April, 2020
Lockdown 2.0	Extended Till 03 May
Lockdown 3.0	Extended Till 17 May
Lockdown 4.0	Extended Till 31 May
Lockdown 5.0	Extended Till 30 June In Containment Zones
Repatriation of Indian Citizens	10,98,000 People Brought Back To India Under Vande Bharat Mission (06 May- 17 August)

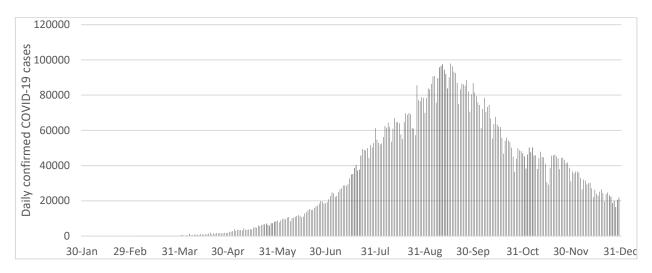Source: Prepared by author from World Health Organization data.

Figure 1: India's confirmed daily COVID-19 cases (Jan-Dec 2020)

Source: Prepared by author from World Health Organization data

COVID-19 outbreak was declared a public health emergency by the World Health Organization after mid-January 2020, months after infections had spread from Wuhan, China to other parts of the world (WHO, 2020). India got its first coronavirus case in late January, but the infection began rising only at the end of March (Tab1e 1 and Figure 1), before which one of the strictest lockdowns had already been implemented in the country along with strictest guidelines for social distancing (Rahman, 2020). Besides the lockdown and shutting down of the economy which suffered its first contraction of 23.9% in four decades, India faced a migrant crisis with restriction of movement in the nations, shutting down of international and domestic travel and a rise in unemployment rates (M. Chaudhary et al., 2020; The Economic Times, 2020).

On the international level, within six months of being hit by the pandemic, the world saw a rising rate of infections owing to inadequate health infrastructures. The pandemic necessitated the states to secure their own health sector and medical capabilities, besides managing their borders. The strategic environment became more restrictive after the pandemic, concentrating more power in the hands of the Foreign Policy Elite (FPE) who were obliged to respond in a timely manner to building national capabilities- defense equipment, technological support to track infections, and health infrastructure for its troops and people. In that aspect, the pandemic provided opportunities for states to be first responders diplomatically and assist other states in building capacities.

China suffered a trust deficit internationally and was being scrutinized for being the epicenter of the outbreak. As the China-US trade conflict intensified, more world leaders began employing measures to shut down their borders to international travelers. While states struggled to cope with the pandemic, China began COVID-19 assistance to nations through supply of masks, medical equipment, while also pushing for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and vaccine trials. COVID-19 diplomacy became a major tool in the hands of big and medium powers to not just assert influence over other states, but also project themselves as responsible powers in the face of a crisis. India took early steps to mark an international presence through its medical diplomacy alongside China, who was already engaged in supplying masks, medicines as well as medical equipment to various nations. India took the lead in the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) as well as in the G-20 nations as the supplier of key medicines to countries that were depending on COVID-19 medical support amid looming medical and economic crisis (Chaudhury, 2020a).

Thus due to the restrictive strategic environment for India internationally, the FPE since remained key actors that influenced India's foreign policy in the Indian Ocean to respond to regional security and other challenges amid rising Chinese influence. For the Indian FPE, the restrictive strategic environment made the security competition more urgent, intensified by the pandemic. The FPE in India, thus perceiving greater clarity about their position in the regional power dynamics, and about the threats and opportunities in this environment, pursued certain balancing strategies through specific components of power, such as COVID-19 assistance, infrastructure development for economic growth, medical equipment, vaccines etc. The next sections discuss the balancing strategies pursued by India amid the pandemic through its COVID-19 diplomacy and strategies.

4. India's COVID-19 diplomacy's influence on foreign policy and development partnerships

In an address in Singapore in 2015, India's then foreign secretary and present Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar, had said that India's "foreign policy dimension is to aspire to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power." It was the beginning of India openly expressing its aim to not just be a nation hedging against risks posed by great powers, the US and China, but the ambition of being a power large enough to balance the power conflict and geopolitical challenges by playing a larger visible role in the region and world. India also showed the alacrity to take up more responsibility in the region as it figures in the power calculations as an indispensable power in regional and international politics. The COVID-19 is one such crisis seeing clashes between great powers, but

also offered an opportunity for India to commit to regional and global health, strategic development and play a leading role at collective action against health security issue.

India's COVID-19 diplomacy draws from its role as the pharmacy of the world that produces around sixty percent of world's vaccines. While sending consignments of paracetamol as well as hydroxychloroquine to SAARC nations in March including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Mauritius, India also sent supplies to Myanmar, Seychelles, and African nations. A SAARC Emergency fund of $10mn aid was setup by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his high level virtual emergency meeting with SAARC leaders, except Pakistan, which sent its Health Minister to attend the meet in March 2020 (Chaudhury, 2020c; Gupta, 2020b). After sending medical team to Maldives, New Delhi assigned Indian Army to prepare rapid response teams to be dispatched to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka (excluding Pakistan and Nepal). A stay on export of hydroxychloroquine was lifted and the drug was allowed for supply to US, European nations as well as countries in Latin America (Arora & Khanna, 2020; Gupta, 2020a). India's medical diplomacy was also aimed at assisting Indian diaspora which is concentrated in East and Southern Africa. India supplied key medicines like HCQ, Paracetamol and ibuprofen along with various antibiotics and drugs related to diabetes, cancer, asthma and cardiovascular conditions, since comorbidity has worsened the impacts of COVID-19 globally (Sanyaolu et al., 2020). India also supplied injections, medical devices, and thermometers alongside holding telemedicine and ITEC training programme for the region.

India reported the most infections in South Asia, which posed a risk for nations like Nepal that share open borders with the nation. While several Nepali workers migrated back to Nepal after March 2020, Nepalese leader KP Sharma Oli faced domestic protests over economic slump and corruption of 10 billion in Nepali currency nation out of the pandemic fund in June (Chalise, 2020; Chaudhury, 2020d). After his election to power in 2018, Prime Minister Oli agreed to participate in China-led BRI including Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, saw Chinese leader Xi Jinping's visit that promised multi-million dollar hydropower projects in the country and received ninety percent of its FDI from China alone in 2019. The same year in November Nepalese leader KP Sharma Oli released a map of Nepal labelling Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh under its territory following a similar map earlier by India. Nepal had been carefully balancing between India and China diplomatically, however, escalation of India-Nepal border dispute and anxiety by New Delhi over reports of Chinese incursions into Nepalese territory (denied by Nepal) had further deteriorated New Delhi's ties with the Himalayan neighbor (Nayak, 2020).

India's increased efforts towards normalizing the tensions between India and Nepal were evident in the high-level visits from the former to the latter within three months. After the Chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing Samant Goel visited Nepal in October to discuss map and Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh dispute, Indian Chief of Army Staff, M.M. Naravane visited Kathmandu in November with medical equipment for COVID-19 pandemic as presents, in turn being conferred 'Maharathi' title from the Nepalese Army (Nayak, 2020). The visit was closely followed in November by Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, post which India's Foreign Secretary Harshvardhan Shringla visited Nepal to provide COVID-19 assistance in the form of prioritization for vaccine supply and 2000 vials of Remdesivir injections (Press Trust of India, 2020b). Finalizing Nepalese Foreign Minister Gyawali's visit to India in January 2021, Indisn FS Shringla assured its commitment to its neighborhood saying, "Once the vaccine is ready, Nepal's requirement would be a priority for us" (Asian News International, 2020c).The aim of India's recently active COVID-19 diplomacy has been resolving tensions with neighboring nation, pushing for infrastructure projects like Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project, and allow air travel between nations and tourists visas for Nepal for greater people-to-people connectivity (Nepali Times, 2020; Siddiqui, 2020).

With the pandemic bringing Prime Minister Modi's focus back to Neighborhood First policy to strengthen India's economic and security relations particularly with the nations surrounding it, New Delhi and Dhaka took another step in the direction by signing agreement for development of railways close to port in Bangladesh to limit the negative impact of COVID-19 in the country which has forced the nation to shut all trade through land borders (Press Trust of India, 2020e). As the two nations celebrate 50 years of their diplomatic relations in 2020, the online inauguration ceremony of railway project saw the nations committing to mutual development. This came in backdrop of China's $1billion irrigation project over Teesta river in Bangladesh, rendering its water treaty negotiation over the river with India null and irrelevant. Prime Minister Modi sent 10 broad gauge diesel locomotives to Bangladesh after sending 50 containers with consumer goods and fabrics through recently constructed Benapole-Petrapole rail link with Indian assistance. While China has been in talks for other development projects in the country, India sent COVID-19 medical assistance to Bangladesh's Institute of Epidemiological Disease Control and Research. Bangladesh actively participated in the Prime Minister Modi-led SAARC emergency fund, and was provided training programs for medical personnel in Bangla language in New Delhi (Press Trust of India, 2020a).

COVID-19 vaccine was another diplomatic tool between the India-China contests for regional influence. Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC) had allowed China to send medical personnel in June and carry out the third phase of its COVID-19 vaccine by China's Sinovac Biotech (Gupta,

2020a). India sent its foreign secretary to Bangladesh on an unannounced visit in August 2020 to discuss the pandemic situation and further the Neighborhood First policy which is key to Prime Minister Modi's Act East Policy of strengthening ties with the ASEAN states, Japan and South Korea. Bangladesh's foreign secretary Bin Momen informed of his talks with Indian counterpart in July and August, "The vaccine will not be limited to India. We have been assured that India will provide the COVID-19 vaccine to us on a priority basis and the pharmaceutical companies of our country will be able to collaborate on this" (Gupta, 2020c). The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council under Bangladesh's Prime Minister Hasina also agreed for India to lead a highly strategic highway project to connect Baraiyarhat-Heyanko and Ramgarh of northern Chittagong near India's North-East borders (Bhattacherjee, 2020). India also began process for creating air travel bubble with Dhaka to allow medical, business and IT professionals to travel by air between the two nations freely. In response Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina assured New Delhi that it would not allow any party hostile to India to use Bangladesh for any anti-India terror activities, in a boost to Modi's Neighborhood First policy (Gupta, 2020c)

To further enhance cooperation through development projects, India launched eITEC programmes for all SAARC as well as non-SAARC nations in the world in March 2020 (Table 2). While India's development cooperation in an international context is also supported by its training assistance program launched on September 15, 1964 called The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme[2]. April also saw an 'Africa-focus working day' for the Ministry of External Affairs in India, where the MEA Minister S. Jaishankar held a series of conversations with his counterparts of some African countries, including Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Mali (Chaudhury, 2020c). China has been actively supplying medical equipment, sending medical personnel and engaging in debt-relief discussion in Africa since March (Bone & Cinotto, 2020). Beijing's active assistance in Africa has been noticeable while other major powers like the US and Europe have been less successful in coordinating and channelizing their efforts in Africa at multiple levels of local governments like China. In this backdrop, India's focus towards Africa's management of the pandemic came at a time when China was facing a domestic backlash in Africa due to emergence of videos on the internet highlighting racism against Africans in China amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Albert, 2020).

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[2] ITEC is a fully-funded program by Indian Government to foster technical and economic cooperation as part of more comprehensive and creative foreign policy. ITEC programmes are held in bilateral and multilateral formats such as Group of 77, G-15, Economic Commission for Africa, Commonwealth Secretariat, UNIDO etc. It has trained technical and medical professionals from ASEAN, BIMSTEC, AU, IOR-ARC, India-Africa Forum Summit etc. in over 160 nations.

Table 2: *e-ITEC programmes (training) by India for other nations regarding COVID-19*

Training Programme	Month	Participants	Participant Nations
Covid-19 Prevention And Management	Apr	Healthcare Professionals	ITEC Countries
Covid-19 Best Practices Of India	Apr	Medical Professionals	ITEC Countries
Covid-19: An Update	May	Healthcare Professionals	SAARC
Covid-19 Best Practices Of India	May	Healthcare Professionals	Latin/South America,
Covid-19 Management	May	Bangladesh medical staff	Bangladesh
Covid-19 Best Practices Of India	May	Healthcare Administrators	ITEC Countries
Covid-19: Good Governance Practices	Jun	Administrative heads	ITEC Countries
Covid-19 Managing Human Resource	Jun	Hospital Administrators	ITEC Countries
Covid Infection Prevention, Control, Biomedical Waste Management	Jun	Doctors, Nursing Officers	ITEC Countries
Mental Healthcare During Covid-19	Jun	Counsellors, Doctors	ITEC Countries
Covid-19: Good Governance Practices	Aug	Administrative heads	ITEC Countries
Policing During Pandemic Times	Aug	Department Officials	ITEC Countries
Basic Adult Hepatology	Oct	Healthcare Professionals	ITEC Countries
Housing For Sustainable Habitats- Policy, Planning, Design, Technologies	Nov	Housing and Construction Department, Brunei	Brunei Darussalam
Buddhist teachings, Vipasana meditation	Nov	Buddhist scholars	Latin America
Legislative Drafting For Law Officers	Nov	Law Officers (Swaziland)	Kingdom of Eswatini
Buddhist teachings, Vipasana meditation	Nov	Buddhist scholars	East Asia
Ayurveda	Nov	Health Personnel	ITEC Countries
Gender Inclusive Governance	Nov	Senior Officials	ITEC Countries
Online Education and Learning	Nov	Education administrators	Maldives
Democracy and Election Management	Nov	Executive Officials	ITEC Countries
Buddhist teachings, Vipasana meditation	Nov	Psychologist, Psychiatrist	ITEC Countries
Securities Markets and Policies	Nov	Banking official, scholars	Bhutan
Technical training	Dec	Ministry Officials	Kingdom of Eswatini
Online Education and Learning	Dec	Education administrators	Maldives
International Commercial Arbitration	Dec	Judges, Judicial Officers	Bhutan
COVID-19 Capacity Building	Dec	Drug Regulatory Officers	ITEC Countries

Source: ITEC, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (MEA India, 2020b)

COVID-19 put forth an opportunity for India, which was battling with rising number of cases at home, to act as a responsible power in the region and extend humanitarian assistance to African nations as well (Table 3). Under the Mission Sagar (SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine of Prime Minister Modi, medical supplies were made available to the African nations in the Indian Ocean as well as to West African countries in April 2020. Indian External Affairs minister, S. Jaishankar tweeted "A SAGAR friendship reaffirmed. Wonderful talking to FM Mohamed El Amine

Souef of Comoros. Our health cooperation and development partnership will surely grow further."
(Ministry of External Affairs, 2020b)

Table 3: *India's COVID-19 Medical Assistance to Africa*

Medical Aid	Recipient African Nations
Medicines: HCQ	Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Congo, Egypt, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Zambia, Uganda, And Comoros.
Medicines: Paracetamol	Zambia, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Congo, Egypt, Eswatini, Chad, Republic Of Congo, Senegal, Sierra Leone And Zimbabwe
Indian Navy Ship Ins Kesari With Medical Consignment, Indian Traditional Medicinal Remedies And Food Grain	The Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar And Comoros

Source: Prepared by author with data from Financial Express, 2020.

India's growing ties with Mauritius reflected in the two separate consignments sent to Mauritius at the request of their government to receive Indian traditional medicine (Table 4). This came after e-inauguration of an ENT Hospital in Mauritius with latest facilities which assisted health authorities in Mauritius to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. After an oil spill by Japanese bulk-carrier *Wakashio* in biodiverse maritime area in Mauritius, there was protest by people whole livelihood depends on marine biodiversity, after the pandemic hit the tourism-dependent island nation (Hindustan Times, 2020). India sent its technical team with the Indian Air Force to tackle the spill, after sending shipments of COVID-19 assistance and Ayurvedic medicine to the island nation under its (Nikkei Asia, 2020). With foreign pharmaceutical companies' Indian counterparts engaged in mass production of vaccines, India also finalized the India-Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement for eliminating duties on trade wherein India exports petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, cereals, cotton etc. to Mauritius (Press Trust of India, 2020h).

Table 4: *India's Medical assistance to its development partner Mauritius*

Mode	Contents of Medical Assistance
Air India Flight	13 Tonnes Of Essential Medicines From India Including 0.5m Tablets Of Hydroxychloroquine.
Navy Ship INS Kesari	Medicines Including 10 Tonnes Of Ayurvedic Medicines. Indian Medical Assistance Team (Including A Community Medicine Specialist, Pulmonologist And Anesthesiologist) To Assist Mauritius Health Authorities And Share Experience & Expertise.

Source: Prepared by author with data from Source: (Chaudhury, 2020b).

India announced Maldives's largest bilateral COVID-19 assistance package of $250 million on Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih's request for pandemic assistance to Indian Prime Minister Modi in September 2020 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Maldives, 2020). The request came right after India secured the largest civilian infrastructure project in Maldives in August 2020 connecting Male with neighboring islands of Villingili, Gulhifahu and Thilafushi. It was the election promise by the President Solih in the previous year's election (Press Trust of India, 2020d). The high-visibility Greater Male Connectivity project through $500mn investment by India, much larger than the previous investment made by China in the island nation. The move came after China asked Maldivian government to pay back $10mn loan granted under China-led development project, which could push Maldives into trade and foreign exchange crisis. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar also promised Maldives supply of essential food items and construction material to maintain price stability during the pandemic. On the domestic level, August 2020 also saw India extending optic fiber network to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in order to extend COVID-19 assistance and information-sharing to the strategic islands in the Indian Ocean, to enable greater control over its seas and neighborhood.

5. India's COVID-19 strategy and building national capabilities

India's COVID strategy showed assertion of territorial and economic sovereignty when Prime Minister Modi declared a $267 billion economic stimulus package (approximately 10% of India's GDP) in May, before announcing the nation's fourth phase of lockdown. Prime Minister Modi spelled out *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan* (Self-Reliant India policy). The policy seeks to combat adverse economic impacts of COVID-19 to pave the way for India's greater integration in the world economy as well as bigger role in geoeconomics in the region by supplying essential medical assistance. China was the key supplier of medical equipment and testing kits globally in March but several reports of faulty test kits

and equipment posed a challenge for nations struggling under the first wave of the pandemic (Asian News International, 2020a). In response, India's personal protective equipment (PPE) industry growing from zero in March to $980mn in May 2020, second only to China. India produced over 60 million PPEs and 150 million N-95 masks till October 2020, from 0 production capacity in March 2020. Between April-December 2020, India exported over 20 million PPE and more than 40 million N-95 masks globally.

Through its *Atmanirbhar Bharat* policy or Self-Reliant India Initiative, India became the second largest manufacturer of PPE and PCR kits amid the COVID-19 crisis- a sharp increase in three months in production capacity from zero in March 2020 to 1 billion in July 2020. India announced permits to export the equipment and gear under its Medical Diplomacy and Extended Neighborhood policy, to Latin America, East Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. India estimated global COVID detection kits market at $5.2bn by the end of 2020. India set the export limit of 23.8mn VTM kits and 10mn PCR kits for the month of August as it opened trade in the month for medical gear, receiving bulk orders from Latin American and East European countries alongside 2mn kits order from Nigeria in August 2020 (Rajagopal, 2020). With India's daily testing capacity rising to 600,000 tests, and its successful control of virus spread in Asia's largest slum, Dharavi in Mumbai, Philippines announced in April 2020 that it would follow India's chase the virus tactic to control COVID-19 in its slums.

While the past few years have seen several border clashes between New Delhi and Beijing, such as at Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014), Doklam (2017), the recent clash in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh led to a manifold rise in the anti-Beijing sentiment in the nation with the martyrdom of 20 Indian soldiers in a fight with their Chinese counterparts (Times Now, 2020). Thereafter, citing cybersecurity and data-leak concerns amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian government banned several Chinese apps. Chinese investment into key IT and financial companies had been blocked by a new law in early 2020 that put severe restrictions on companies originating in India's neighbors that shared borders with India.

India's former national security advisor (2005-2010) M. K. Narayanan, stated, "We're not enemies, but I think there's always a problem about being friends," Narayanan said. "There is a competition between the two civilizations." (Choudhury, 2020). India also announced 5G network in July 2020 supported only by domestic technologies. India also announced plan to stop import of defense equipment and increase foreign direct investment in production of defense equipment. India disallowed Chinese companies from Indian highway projects, Ministry of Communication terminated 4G upgradation for state-run telecoms by Chinese firms, and banned Chinese firms with Indian joint ventures from participating in road and infrastructure development projects in India, in a bid to counter

China for border attacks, and support Prime Minister Modi's Self-Reliant India initiative for domestic companies. Chinese investments were blocked into key infrastructure projects in India. The Chinese FDI and FII was also blocked by the law of the government in early 2020.

India shares Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) platform with China and Pakistan. While the online SCO meeting was attended by India amid the pandemic, New Delhi refused to participate in the Kavkaz-2020 military exercise for the first time, where it had planned to send its 200 military personnel alongside the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a; Philip, 2020). Though the COVID-19 pandemic was quoted as one of the reasons, India's decision was clearly a signal of prioritizing its territorial sovereignty where Indian and Chinese forces had engaged in several clashes in 2020 at LAC, while India-Pakistan clashes have been an ongoing phenomenon across LoC (Peri, 2020; Philip, 2020). India also postponed its annual summit meeting even in online format between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin in December 2020 citing the pandemic as the reason, while in fact Russia has articulated its unease over the Indo-Pacific and Russia's Ambassador to India Nikolay Kudashev overlooked India-China conflict and stated Indo-Pacific "has no common vision" and Quad is "detrimental to the security and stability of the region" (Basu, 2020).

India's complex relationship with Iran was further strained during the pandemic when in March Iran was among the worst affected nations including the death of its top cleric due to COVID-19 infection (New Strait Times, 2020; Parpiani & Sawhney, 2020). India, which has invested heavily in Iran's only deep-water port Chabahar, has much less to offer to Iran in terms of resources, where it cannot compete with China. The port allows India to counter the China-built Gwadar port in Pakistan and direct access Central Asia (Amirthan, 2017; Chakma, 2019). The pandemic drove India closer to the US which had imposed heavy sanctions on Iran, killed Iranian general and commander of Quds forces, Qasem Soleimani in drone attack and pressurized India to stop all oil import from Tehran (Mohan, 2020). Chabahar port, didn't produce enough economic support during the pandemic and Iran partnered with China for the construction of the key railway link project connecting the Chabahar port (built by India) to Zahedan, although it was a project India was to work on with Iran (Amirthan, 2017; Chadha, 2020a; Mohan, 2020; Ramana, 2012; Teja, 2015).

Right after the border clash with India in Galwan Valley, China attended a virtual meeting on July 27 with Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan to discuss cooperation amid the pandemic (Patranobis, 2020). India has been striving to utilize the pandemic as an opportunity to enhance military and security partnerships with nations that are engaged in territorial disputes with China. In December 2020, Indian Prime Minister Modi and Vietnamese leader Nguyen Xuan Phuc held a virtual summit to discuss post-

pandemic maritime security ties. Though Vietnam had been performing better than India in terms of the COVID-19 infections, occurrence of crisis due to floods in Vietnam was responded to by India that sent its ship INS Kiltan to Nha Rhang port of Ho Chi Minh with 15 tonnes of relief material under Mission SAGAR, for people in central Vietnam (Press Trust of India, 2020f). The same ship before returning, then participated in a passage exercise with Vietnamese Navy (December 26-27) An Indian Navy warship will undertake a "passage exercise" with the Vietnamese Navy in the South China Sea from December 26 to 27 for maritime cooperation against Chinese heavy military presence in South China Sea (Asian News International, 2020b).

The strategic environment became even more restrictive with India and China competing for defense equipment assistance to South Asian and Indian Ocean nations amid the increased securitization of the Indian Ocean. Before the first Malabar exercise by the four Quad nations in November 2020, several Indian FPE visited the region almost simultaneously to assert Indian commitment to post COVID-19 bilateral ties enhancement as well as secure key defense pacts with the small nations that find themselves constantly balancing and hedging between India and China (Nayak, 2020). After Indian Army Chief M. M. Naravane was conferred the honorary title "General of Nepali Army" in November by Nepal's President B.D. Bhandari, Indian Foreign Secretary Shringla followed with the promise of priority access to medicines and vaccines to Nepal alongside key infrastructure investment deal of a dam (A. Chaudhary, 2020; Press Trust of India, 2020c).

Sri Lanka and Seychelles, both had recent elections that upturned the incumbent leaderships over issues of sovereignty and involvement of powers like India and China before and after the pandemic. Indian plans in 2018 to build a naval base on Assumption Island, a supposed counter to Chinese Djibouti base, was stalled after protests over sovereignty led by Indian-origin Wavel Ramkalawan. China has financed construction of Seychellois parliament with a couple of light aircraft warships on the island nation which is strategically located for surveillance of exclusive economic zones in Indian Ocean. After announcing Mission SAGAR towards COVID-19 medical assistance to Indian Ocean nations like Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Maldives, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar visited Seychelles, pledging infrastructure projects worth $91 million and calling Seychelles as "particular priority" for India's COVID-19 initiatives (Chadha, 2020b; Press Trust of India, 2020g). India's new approach of prioritizing economic ties is aimed at deepening military relations in the nation where India has previously provided military training, three naval boats, two surveillance aircrafts and six coastal radar stations (Sinha, 2020).

At the same time after sending consignments under Mission SAGAR for pandemic assistance to Sri Lanka, Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval held the first Sri Lanka-India-Maldives trilateral in six years, for maritime security, with Mauritius and Seychelles as observers (Bhaumik, 2020). Sri Lanka, one of the fist nations to join Chinese BRI project, had owed China $4.8 billion in loans under earlier President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and increased its debt by $1 billion during the pandemic under his newly elected younger brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa instead of borrowing from other sources (Mushtaq, 2020). China had leased Hambantota port in Sri Lanka for 99 years over non-payment of debt and the recent election necessitated India's efforts towards securing Indian Ocean (Chadha, 2020a; Macan-Markar, 2020). Doval's visit was aimed at assuring progress on deal singed to jointly develop and operate Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) in Colombo port by India-Japan-Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka continues to be a challenge for India after it received huge COVID-19 medical assistance from China between April-August, and in October expressed doubts over securitization and militarization of the region after the MALABAR exercise in Indian Ocean by all four Quad nations in November (Johnson, 2020; Mitra, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The paper examined the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the strategic environment for India in Indian Ocean region and discussed how it impacted India's foreign policy towards the region, through the lens of neo-classical realism. The paper stated that the pandemic created a restrictive strategic environment and a situation of high opportunities and threats for India. The paper argued that India's COVID-19 strategies were catalyst in shaping India's security policies and initiatives in the Indian Ocean region in 2020. The pandemic posed not only a severe health risk domestically but also became a global issue, in fact treated as a security issue in some states. Thus, COVID-19 provided a restrictive strategic environment for India and necessitated the concentration of decision making power in the hands of the FPE for the crisis management as well as foreign policy initiatives to push for India's greater role in the regional security.

India's COVID-19 diplomacy, i.e., the dialogue and negotiations held between the foreign policy elite of India and other states related to the pandemic influenced the nation's development partnerships regionally. India aimed for greater regional engagement through not just economic infrastructure development but also health infrastructure development in South Asia as well as Indian Ocean nations such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka etc. The restrictive strategic environment meant that engaging in its neighborhood was more than a contest for India with China. It

became an urgent challenge for New Delhi to maintain cordial relations and development-based growth stimulating partnerships in Indian Ocean to ensure its presence in helping nations out of the pandemic on path to economic recovery.

The paper also discussed how the restrictive environment for India was taken as an opportunity by the FPE to push for increasing or establishing local production capabilities for dealing with the pandemic, including domestic production of PPE, masks and vaccines. With India-China aggression at the borders and seas increasing despite the COVID-19 crisis, India responded by employing its COVID-19 strategy to be centered on dealing with military aggression at the borders and increasing economic self-reliance to play a larger role regionally in assisting other nations ion the Indian Ocean.

Overall, India's foreign policy under the restrictive strategic environment during the pandemic became more focused and streamlined towards building internal capabilities and playing a more significant role as a regional power in the Indian Ocean. Though India's financial capabilities amid the pandemic are much more limited than China's, India's policies were aimed at asserting its position as an influential power in the Indian Ocean, by forging new economic and defense partnerships during and despite the pandemic. In the backdrop of constantly changing relations among states and high geopolitical volatility, a multi-pronged or multi-faceted foreign policy post-pandemic will help India establish a clear visibility and significance in the Indian Ocean region and even beyond.

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