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## Big Picture: India's COVID Diplomacy

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India's COVID diplomacy at one of the worst global crisis of recent decades is enabling Delhi to emerge as a responsible and reliable international power at a time when many established international actors have floundered.

- India has begun sending dispatches of rescue medicines as gifts to neighboring countries to help them fight the coronavirus pandemic.
- The government was sending drugs to Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Seychelles, Mauritius, and some African countries.
- Supplies are being made to the Gulf in the backdrop of growing strategic partnerships.

- The government has also cleared the export of Covid-19 drugs to countries such as the US, Spain, Brazil, Bahrain, Germany, and the UK in line with the commercial contracts signed with Indian pharmaceutical companies.
- The government provided 15 tonnes of medical supplies comprising masks, gloves, and other emergency medical equipment to China.

## Opportunities and Challenges

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- **Leadership Opportunity:** From the SAARC region to G-20 India has taken a lead in addressing the present crisis.

India's diplomacy has played a major role in managing the crisis, be it the evacuation of distressed people or following the pandemic minute by minute, or settling immediate and complicated issues including facilitating the evacuation of stranded foreign nationals in India.
- **Digital Governance and technology:** The COVID-19 crisis has brought new needs for digital government services and more demand for existing services.
  - Developers in governments are engaged in designing new apps and services to help in the fight against COVID-19.
  - Countries like India which were already making a concerted push towards Digitisation through its programs like **Digital India** can stand to advantage from the changed circumstances.
- **Economic Challenge:** Lockdown due to COVID-19 is the third shock that the informal economy in India has faced, after demonetisation and GST.

The lockdown has hit millions of daily wage earners, the self-employed and small businesses, and the rural landless poor. These vulnerable segments of the workforce face the immediate problem of a lack of income as well as hunger.
- **Lack of international leadership:** There is at present a leadership crisis at the global level as no country is looking at the pandemic as a common fight of mankind against the virus.
  - The fact that China delayed reporting the virus to the WHO and perhaps, in the process, exacerbated the spread of the virus across the globe has hurt its global standing.
  - It has been reported that the Trump administration did not even inform the European Union before it shut off flights from Europe.
  - The initiative taken by Mr. Modi in the early days to convene a **meeting of the South-Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** countries stands out in contrast to the pusillanimous leadership around the world.

## Way Forward

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- **Boost Medical Diplomacy:** When the world is questioning the role played by China – in exporting much needed protective gear and testing kits that some governments have reportedly found faulty, India has offered not just supportive medical staff but also an entire buffet of generic medicines, medical training, and medical tourism.
  - India is also the **leading producer of generic medicines** around the world.
  - India should, therefore, focus on further building medical diplomacy as a facet of diplomatic relations.
- **Promote Multilateralism:** The Prime Minister has shown commendable initiative in convening leaders of the SAARC nations for a regional collaborative effort on COVID-19.
  - Taking a cue from India the **Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' summit** was held, chaired by Saudi Arabia.
  - The G20 leaders applauded India's role in urging nations to come together through video conferencing.
  - The COVID-19 pandemic presents India with an opportunity to revive multilateralism, become a strong and credible champion of internationalism, and assume a leadership role.
- **Shift towards digitisation:** Since COVID-19 is showing no sign of leaving any time soon, it is only natural to expect societal level behavioral changes.
  - Global diplomacy should also move towards digitisation as it would help decrease the expense and would promote transparency in diplomatic matters.
  - India has shown the path by calling for virtual meetings of regional organisations, and it should continue to do so with more vigour.
- **Convert goodwill to good diplomacy:** The Indian generosity in the times of this pandemic has not gone unnoticed and has earned India well-deserved goodwill.
  - India also enjoys a world image of being a robust democracy and non-predatory as opposed to China.
  - But goodwill will not automatically lead to better relations and an increased global role unless it is supported by constant efforts from the Indian diplomatic mission.