

**Chinese Aid to the South Asian Countries
at the time of COVID-19 Pandemic:
Norm or for Political Gains?**

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Abstract

After the COVID-19 spread in early 2020, China became a “benevolent” donor and accelerated its public diplomacy in South Asia. The Chinese donated medicines, ventilators and provided other forms of assistance. China has also ramped up the supply of vaccines to the South Asian countries. Initially, India also offered all forms of support to its neighbours; however, it was “forced” to pause supply after the country was devastated by the second wave of the pandemic between end of March and July 2021. This paper discusses China’s foreign aid policy and diplomacy in South Asia, especially during the COVID-19 health crisis.

Keywords: *aid, China, COVID-19, diplomacy, South Asia*

1. Introduction

Like other parts of the world, the COVID-19 has hit hard the economy, overstressed the weak health infrastructure, and killed many people in South Asia. To deal with the region's health emergency and economic problems, acting along the lines of "neighbourhood-first" policy, India came forward to provide all forms of help to its neighbours. However, all such help and support "paused" after the second wave of pandemic hit India in March 2021. The Chinese also provided initial help to the South Asian countries, but the second wave in India provided them a free space to which they responded and emerged as a "saviour" (Attanayake and Zheng, 2021). China held formal meetings with the leaders from the South Asian countries to find a way to address the pandemic-related challenges. The "pandemic diplomacy", as several Chinese officials and scholars mentioned below, is said to be guided by norms, whilst for others, it has an inherent political objective. This paper attempts to answer three questions. *First*, is the Chinese foreign aid programme guided by norms or has political purposes? *Second*, what factors motivate China to pursue its foreign aid diplomacy in South Asia at the time of pandemic? *Third*, how effective the Chinese assistance to South Asian countries has been to deal with the COVID-19 and related problems?

2. China's Foreign Aid Diplomacy

There are theoretical debates on why countries provide aid and assistance. For political realists, aid increasingly intends to influence the political judgements and decisions of the recipient countries. For liberals, the assistance helps the recipient countries, enhances their development, and facilitates commerce and trade. While making or announcing foreign aid, countries perform public diplomacy that is

considered a soft power to sharpen their hard power (economic and political power). By making donations, countries deemed more “altruistic gain” in the form of material, trust, and respect (Leight-Give’on, 2010). Unlike them, the constructivists highlight the significance of norms in international politics. There are scholars and analysts who believe that foreign aid is driven by humanitarian considerations and manifests the “moral politics” of the donor (Hattori, 2003). The norm and culture of a country play an essential role in foreign aid-related decisions by the donor governments (Elgström, 1990) who are answerable to their citizens. Lancaster (2006) argues that because of the nature of domestic politics in aid-giving countries, “it has always been—and will continue to be—used to achieve a mixture of different goals.”

In the post-Second World War (1939-1945) years, the beginning of foreign aid to achieve political and social mileage can be traced to the famous Marshall plan in 1948. The aid plan was named after retired General and then United States of America’s Secretary of State, George C Marshall. To draw domestic support, along with then Secretary of Commerce, Averell Harriman, Marshall travelled across the U.S. During his tour Marshall and others spoke to everyone from Rotary Clubs to Chambers of Commerce about “nobleness” of the aid and why it was in the USA’s self-interest to re-construct a more stable Europe, mainly Western Europe (Schroyer, 2017). However, the plan was opposed by about 50 per cent of Americans (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the American Congress passed the Economic Cooperation Act in March 1948, under which it approved the funding that eventually rose to over US\$12 billion to reconstruct the Western European countries (Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, n.d.). The Marshall Plan received overwhelming public support in Western Europe and helped the U.S. to establish its political influence in those countries. Since then, many

countries have used foreign aid as an effective tool to achieve their hidden or tangible political objectives. Foreign aid has become an essential part of public diplomacy, which, as a term, was coined by the American diplomat Eduard Gullion to illuminate USA's effective Public Relations (popularly termed as PR) war against the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War years (1948-1991) (Helmets, 2016).

For Regilme and Hodzi (2021), foreign aid programmes necessarily shape the domestic politics of the recipient countries, which is more ready to accommodate the policy preferences of the donor government. The aid also enhances the social reputation and legitimacy of the donor state in the world (*ibid.*). Reinsberg (2019) finds that donations have been used by some donor countries to serve their utter selfish interests, including to get political support to become a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Before moving ahead, it is pertinent to know that aid is given by countries' governments and individuals and private organisations. The most standard way to measure the assistance is the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which, as defined in 1972 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),

consists of flows to developing countries and multilateral institutions provided by official agencies, including state and local governments, or by their executive agencies, each transaction of which meets the following test: a) it is administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as its main objective, and b) it is concessional in character and contains a grant element of at least 25% (calculated at a rate of discount of 10%).

(OECD, 2006: 16)

This definition of the ODA has been changed over the years by the OECD. In 2018, based on new data, the ODA grant equivalent is considered as a measure of donor effort. The ODA flows include grants, loans, and other such flows (OECD, n.d.). They are those flows to countries and territories on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC)'s list of ODA recipients and to multilateral development institutions which are (*ibid.*):

- 1) provided by official agencies, including state and local governments, or by their executive agencies; and
- 2) each transaction of which:
 - a) is administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as its main objective; and
 - b) is concessional in character. In DAC statistics, this implies a grant element of at least:
 - 45 per cent in the case of bilateral loans to the official sector of Least Developed Countries and other Low-Income Countries (calculated at a rate of discount of 9 per cent).
 - 15 per cent in the case of bilateral loans to the official sector of Low-to-Middle Income Countries (calculated at a rate of discount of 7 per cent).
 - 10 per cent in the case of bilateral loans to the official sector of Upper Middle-Income Countries (calculated at a rate of discount of 6 per cent).
 - 10 per cent in the case of loans to multilateral institutions (calculated at a rate of discount of 5 per cent for global institutions and multilateral development banks, and 6 per cent for other organisations, including sub-regional organisations).

After a brief discussion on theoretical debates on foreign aid, its objectives and impact, this article now explains China's foreign aid programme, which began after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was set up in 1949. In fact, foreign aid was an important part of the public diplomacy of Mao Zedong, head of the PRC (1949-1976) (Atkinson, 2019).

As China grew economically and became politically powerful in the following decades, foreign aid has gradually become part of its public diplomacy and politics. In his three-volume edited work, Copper (2016) observes that during the Cold War years, China drove its aid and investment to pursue Communist Bloc solidarity, secure border, and compete with India for influence in the Third World. China has used aid diplomacy to marginalize Taiwan's claim and defeat it diplomatically. Such objectives were changed, as Copper observes, in the age of globalisation where China effectively uses foreign aid to market its product and model of economic development (Copper, 2016).

Contrary to Copper and many others who believe that China uses foreign aid as an essential tool to achieve its foreign policy-related goals, Zha Daojiong¹ (2005, cited in Yeh, 2010: 19) highlighted three goals of Chinese foreign aid: first, "an instrument for serving the country's diplomatic agendas"; second, "serving the country's economic development needs"; and third, "promoting national re-unification". Yeh (2010: 45) finds that the Chinese foreign aid is mainly guided by two norms: sovereignty, informed by its non-interference policy, and developmentalism, through shaping the Beijing Consensus. Zhang (2020) argues that China's foreign aid programme is influenced by the country's three co-existing identities: a socialist country, a developing country and a rising great power. Zhou (2017) divides change in the Chinese aid policies into three phases. The first phase began at the founding of "New China", the second began at the beginning of the

Chinese economic reform, and the third started at the beginning of the 21st century. In the first phase, internationalism was the guiding thought; in the second, adjustment and reform became the theme; and in the third phase, development and cooperation have been intensified in a broader range of areas. Fu Ziying, China's former Vice-Minister of Commerce, divided China's foreign aid into five stages: the 1950s, the 1960s–1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 21st century. Zhou has simplified it into the three abovementioned phases (Zhou, 2017: 1).

Within China, there is a stiff competition among various institutions and agencies, such as the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, and companies responsible for implementing the aid projects, to lead assistance programme (Zhang and Smith, 2017). To address some of the external and internal problems related to aid, under the Chinese President Xi Jinping, Cheng (2019: 2) finds that Beijing has made some reforms to achieve multiple goals. Cheng talks about three aims that China looks at to achieve through reforms. First, these changes aim to improve China's foreign aid efficiency and effectiveness by cleaning up the country's foreign aid system. Second, in response to foreign criticism for mixing commercial deals with development assistance, Beijing intends to differentiate its foreign aid from commercial financing packages. Third, China wants to integrate a more excellent range of socially conscious development projects in agriculture, public health, and education into its foreign aid portfolio and the Belt and Road Initiative.

White papers published by the Chinese government since 2011 delineate the country's foreign aid programme and its objective. Until 2011, official foreign aid statistics were considered "classified material" because of fears of domestic resentment from the millions of Chinese living in poverty (Regilme and Hodzi 2021). Besides, foreign aid was essentially conceptualized as a reflection of the country's

operationalization of foreign and domestic policy objectives, making it challenging to distinguish such assistance from other investment and trade deals (*ibid.*). Overcoming and sidelining such hesitations, Beijing published the first white paper on foreign aid in 2011, second in 2014 and third in 2021. The title of the third white paper is “China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era”. Mentioning the origins of China’s foreign aid, the 45-page white paper in the English language says that an inherent force driving China’s development cooperation are: the Chinese nation’s ideal of universal harmony; the Chinese idea of repaying kindness with kindness; the Chinese tradition of internationalism; and China’s sense of responsibility as a significant country (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021). About its approach to development cooperation, the white paper says: promoting a global community of shared future is the mission of China’s international development cooperation; pursuing the greater good and shared interests, with higher priority given to the former, is the underlying guideline; South-South cooperation is the focus; Belt and Road cooperation is a powerful platform; and helping other developing countries to pursue the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a crucial goal (*ibid.*). China’s principles for international development cooperation mentioned in the white paper are: respecting each other as equals; doing the best we can to help; focusing on development and improving people’s lives; providing the means for independent development; conducting effective cooperation in diverse forms; ensuring delivery and sustainability; being open and inclusive to promote exchanges and mutual learning; and advancing with the times and breaking new ground (*ibid.*). In the white paper, China has pledged to provide about the US\$2 billion to countries most affected by the pandemic over the next two years and supply vaccines (*ibid.*).

Scholars and political analysts such as Chellaney (2017) accuse China of using debt to trap the smaller nations to push them more firmly under its thumb. As China is charged with, such trap is primarily pursued through projects worth about US\$1 trillion under the Belt and Road Initiative (Chellaney, 2017). China, however, refutes all such accusations. Like the 2011 and 2014 white papers, the 2021 white paper includes debt relief in its list of achievements. Like in the past, the debt relief has targeted interest-free loans rather than concessional loans. Between 2013 and 2018, China wrote off 98 interest-free loans owed by recipient countries, totaling US\$640 million. Concessional loans (and commercial loans) comprise the majority of debts in recipient countries (Zhang, 2021). The 2021 white paper emphasizes that China and the recipient countries should rely on bilateral consultations to solve the debt problem (*ibid.*).

The 2021 document was published three years after the formation of the China International Development Cooperation Agency in 2018. There are three significant shifts in the 2021 document from the past. First, it refers to development cooperation rather than aid. Moreover, for the first time the Belt and Road Initiative component is included within the development cooperation framework of a white paper (Cichocka, Mitchell and Ritchie, 2021). It also mentions bureau-level discussions held with Japan and the European Union, unlike past editions where trilateral pilot projects were mentioned. Second, the white paper talks about the “performance appraisal mechanism for entities undertaking projects” to seek transparency (*ibid.*). Third, the document talks about increasing the volume of aid, giving more grants, and giving prominence to governance-related projects (*ibid.*).

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, China has come forward to assist countries in dealing with the health emergency. Not only the state

but also foundations such as that of the Chinese billionaire Jack Ma too provided medical help to many countries of the world including Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in South Asia (Kuruwita, 2020). The next section of this article looks at the Chinese aid to the South Asian countries during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. China's Aid to the South Asian Countries at the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

South Asia is one of the regions where China has poured aid and made investments for years. Historically, South Asia has been India's sphere of influence, but soon after its defeat in 1962's Sino-India war, many countries of the region approached Beijing to check New Delhi. China positively responded and started spreading its presence in the region. Consequently, by 2020, China has established strong presence in South Asia. It is challenging India's historical position in the region. After the COVID-19 outbreak, China has provided aid and assistance to almost all South Asian countries which is likely to further strengthen its influence on the region.

3.1. China's Aid to Pakistan

China has made considerable investments in Pakistan to move its economy and has always extended diplomatic support to Islamabad on all international platforms (Ranjan, 2021). Bilateral trade between the two countries is about US\$16.4 billion (Xinhua, 17th September 2021), in favour of China. Since its inauguration in 2013, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has turned into a pillar to their political and economic relationships.

As an “all-weather friend”, China rushed to provide health-related assistance to Pakistan to fight against the pandemic. Pakistan registered its first COVID-19 patient at the end of February 2020, and numbers increased subsequently. In early 2020, in Gilgit-Baltistan, which is the most crucial component of the CPEC, China, at the request of the local government, sent medical supplies, including ventilators (*Global Times*, 19th May 2020). Chinese assistance also reached to other parts of Pakistan. Not only the government but also Chinese people and companies working in Pakistan extended help to Pakistani hospitals through donations via the National Disaster Management Authority (*ibid.*).

In July 2020, China provided US\$15 million worth of aid to Pakistan to support the country’s fight against the coronavirus pandemic. China sent experts and equipment in July 2020 (*Geo News*, 23rd July 2020).

After the Chinese developed vaccine, Pakistan was one of the early countries that received doses as a gift from Beijing. In February 2021, Pakistan secured 1.2 million doses from Sinopharm (Albert. 2021). The Chinese government donated the third batch of COVID-19 vaccines in April 2021 (Xinhua, 27th April 2021).

3.2. Chinese Aid to Sri Lanka

Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led Sri Lankan government shares good relations with both India and China. There was a ripple in India-Sri Lanka relations in 2020 when Colombo cancelled a deal with India and Japan to develop the East Container Terminal at Colombo port with Adani group. The deal was cancelled because, as reported, the Rajapaksa government was facing threats of countrywide protests on the port’s privatization. Reacting to the deal’s cancellation, India asked Sri Lanka to adhere to its “international commitments” (*Scroll.in*, 5th February

2021). Some in India accused China of pressuring Sri Lanka to cancel the port deal – an accusation that the Sri Lankan foreign minister, Dinesh Gunawardena, refuted (*The Hindu*, 10th February 2021).

At the time of the pandemic, to fight the health emergency in Sri Lanka, both India and China came forward to help. In April 2021, Sri Lanka received 600,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to vaccinate about 200,000 Chinese workers estimated to be living in the island nation. After the pandemic hit Sri Lanka, China donated thousands of masks and testing kits and health equipment (*DW*, 8th April 2021). Earlier, in April 2020, chargé d'affaires of the Chinese Embassy Hu Wei handed over the first shipment of aid from China, including 50,000 medical masks and 1,008 COVID-19 test kits, to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (*Xinhua*, 8th April 2020). Not only the government of China but also Chinese companies assisted Sri Lanka. In March 2020, China Merchants Port Group (CMPort), the parent company of Colombo International Container Terminals (CICT) and Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG), donated 1,000 personal protective suits to the Sri Lankan government. HIPG also supplied dry rations, including milk powder, grains, potatoes, and tinned fish, to temples and households in the southern Hambantota District during a partial lockdown (*ibid.*). China National Aero-Technology International Engineering Corporation (AVIC-ENG), which has built local infrastructure including highways and water supply projects, handed over thousands of protective masks to three police stations in central Colombo. Huawei, a world leader in telecommunications and 5G technology, donated several surgical masks, personal protective equipment, protective eyeglasses, and bottles of hand sanitisers to Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health (*ibid.*). In early April, the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC), which has built local infrastructure such as airport highways, donated healthcare equipment including protective

masks and surgical gloves to the Sri Lankan Navy (*ibid.*). Sri Lanka also received 20,064 detection kits (PCR-Fluorescence Probing) for COVID-19 from Jack Ma foundation (Kuruwita, 2020).

3.3. Chinese Aid to Afghanistan

In January 2021, after Joe Biden took charge as the new President of the United States, people expected a new policy towards war-torn Afghanistan. After a series of talks and thinking, the U.S. troops finally withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021. The withdrawal of the U.S. troops was followed by a formal announcement of takeover of Kabul by the dreaded Taliban. Since then, both India and China have been engaged in discussion with the Taliban's representatives to secure their respective interests in the country.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, India supplied medicines and then vaccines to Afghanistan to fight against the pandemic. China donated the first batch of medical supplies to Afghanistan on 2nd April 2020. In August 2020, Afghanistan received more anti-epidemic supplies from China to aid its fight against COVID-19. The collection included 20,000 protective suits, nearly 40,000 test kits, two fully automated nucleic acid extractors, two PCR (polymerase chain reaction) machines, and masks and gloves (Xinhua, 10th August 2020). Further, in March 2021, China pledged to deliver 400,000 doses of Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine to Afghanistan (Reuters, 1st March 2021).

3.4. Chinese Aid to the Maldives

Till 2018, the Maldives, under its President, Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018), tilted in favour of China. This policy shifted after Ibrahim Mohamed Solih became President in 2018. Former President of Maldives and present Speaker of the Parliament, Mohamed Nasheed,

accused China of pushing the country into a debt. The Chinese have refuted such accusations and helped Male during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, the Maldives received the first shipment, including pandemic prevention materials from China. The aid from the Yunnan province included protective masks, surgical masks, gloves, stethoscopes, goggles, and protective suits (*Global Times*, 31st March 2020). After vaccine was developed, then Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, handed over the Sinopharm vaccines and some syringes to Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid and Minister of Health Ahmed Naseem (Xinhua, 26th March 2021).

In an interview by Xinhua, Solih acknowledged the role of China in the development of infrastructures in Maldives. He said, “I have personally witnessed the commitment and efforts by the Chinese builders on these important [infrastructure] projects... Despite the ongoing pandemic, I am humbled that Chinese projects resumed work, with Chinese workers returning to Maldives with precautionary measures in place” (Xinhua, 12th March 2021). He expressed that China would continue to support Maldives to rebuild the tourism sector and diversify the country’s economy (*ibid.*).

3.5. Chinese Aid to Nepal

In October 2019, India and Nepal were entangled in confrontation over national boundary in the western Himalayas. Bilateral relations slide further after Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated a road to Mansarovar from the Indian side of its boundary with Nepal in the western Himalayas in May 2020. Tensions eased after a talk between the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Nepali counterpart K.P. Oli on 15th August 2020. Since then, several officials from the two countries have visited to each other’s capitals.

In recent years China and Nepal became close after India carried out unofficial blockade in 2015-16. India's blockade supported the ethnic Madhesis who were protesting against insertions of certain provisions into Nepal's constitution of 2015. To fight against the COVID-19 in May 2020, the Chinese embassy in Nepal handed over 40,000 PCR test kits, 20,000 N95 masks, 800,000 surgical masks and 10,000 PPE sets (Xinhua, 11th May 2020). Then, in 2021, China donated 800,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Nepal (*The Straits Times*, 30th March 2021).

3.6. Chinese Aid to Bangladesh

The government-to-government relations between India and Bangladesh is close. However, the situation is different on the ground, especially after India came out with the National Register of Citizen (NRC) in the Indian state of Assam. In December 2019, India also introduced Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), under which persecuted Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Christian and Sikh minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh can seek citizenship in India. Both NRC and CAA have angered many in Bangladesh. The radical groups in Bangladesh used the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka in March 2021 to express their anger by carrying out protests which turned violent claiming lives of some people.

Amidst the NRC-CAA issues, India has helped Dhaka to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and so has China. The Chinese assisted Bangladesh in batches. In the third batch in June 2020, China supplied 30,000 testing reagents, 50,000 protective medical gowns, 1,300,000 surgical masks, 50,000 N95 medical protective masks and 50,000 medical protective goggles (Embassy of China in Bangladesh, 5th June 2020). China sent a 10-member medical team, organized by China's National Health Commission, consisting of experts from the Chinese province of Hainan (Xinhua, 8th June 2020). To help Dhaka, in

2020, the Beijing-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) approved a US\$250 million loan to Bangladesh to help the country cope with the coronavirus pandemic (Reuters, 21st May 2020).

3.7. China's Offer to India

In June 2020, the Indian and Chinese armies clashed in Ladakh in which 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers lost their lives. The tension at the border remains, but subsided after a series of talks between the sector commanders from the two countries.

Before tensions at the border escalated, in April 2020, the Indian government and private companies got about 15 million PPE kits from China (*The Hindu*, 14th April 2020). Of the 15 million, about 50,000 kits failed the quality test and so were dumped (*Outlook*, 16th April 2020). In 2021, after the second wave of the pandemic started killing people in India, China offered help. In April 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi sent “a message of sympathy” to his Indian counterpart, S. Jaishankar, reiterating support from China (*The Straits Times*, 29th April 2021). On difficulties to procure medical supplies from China by India, Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Weidong tweeted, “Chinese medical suppliers are working overtime on orders from India, at least 25,000 orders for oxygen concentrators in recent days. Cargo planes are under the plan for medical supplies. Chinese Customs will facilitate the relevant process” (Sun Weidong’s tweet, 28th April 2021).

3.8. Chinese Vaccines to Bhutan

Nestled between India and China, Bhutan strongly faced COVID-19 situation. The country is traditionally very close to India. At the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, initially India helped Bhutan, but after March 2021

Bhutan also looked for other suppliers to get vaccines. Due to its multiple-channel diplomacy, Thimphu succeeded in receiving 500,000 doses of Moderna mRNA vaccine from the USA, and 25,000 AstraZeneca doses from Denmark (*The Bhutanese*, 20th July 2021). China donated 50,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine voluntarily without Thimphu approaching Beijing with any such request. China offered to send more vaccine, but Bhutan did not require them, as it had enough vaccine for its population (*ibid.*). Politically, in the middle of 2020, the Chinese made a territorial claim on Bhutan's Saketang Wildlife sanctuary. Notably, the two countries are engaged in border talks since 1980s. In 2021, they signed a deal to speed up the bilateral talks on their disputed border.

Hence, Chinese COVID-19 assistance and vaccines have reached to all South Asian countries. Going beyond the material assistance and providing vaccines, China also diplomatically engaged with the South Asian countries. The following section discusses this.

4. Chinese Diplomacy in South Asia at the Time of COVID-19

The character of the China's diplomacy has changed over the years. Under Mao Zedong, the "New China" followed the "leaning to one side" policy, but it largely adhered to independence and self-reliance. China's alliance with the former Soviet Union was seen as necessary to counter the threat from the United States (Su, 2017). It propagated the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.² As power struggle between U.S. and Soviet Union intensified, Mao decided to establish an anti-hegemonism "united front". The "united front" extended from China through the Middle East to Western Europe, through the Atlantic to Canada and the United States, and then through the Pacific to Japan, including Australia and New Zealand, and then rallied a wide range of

Asian, African and Latin American countries along the lines (*ibid.*). This was the strategic diplomatic thought of “One Line and a Vast Area” (*ibid.*). In 1980s Deng Xiaoping made major adjustment of China’s diplomacy, and launched China’s independent foreign policy of peace. China adhered to the diplomatic policy of opposing hegemonism and safeguarding world peace, developed normal relations with the United States, Japan and Western Europe, and followed a policy of nonalignment (*ibid.*). Following the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 when the Chinese government crushed the pro-democracy student movement, major Western powers imposed economic, trade, political and other sanctions on Beijing (Zhu, 2010: 1). To improve China’s relationship with Asian neighbours, Qian Qichen, China’s then Foreign Minister (1988-1998) and later Vice-Premier (1993-2003), nicknamed as the “godfather of contemporary Chinese diplomacy”, coined “good neighbour diplomacy” (*mulin waijiao*) which worked successfully in re-setting the country’s ties. By the mid-90s, as the Chinese economy grew and China became more self-confident, talks of “revitalizing the Chinese nation” (*zhenxing zhonghua*) became prevalent (*ibid.*). Increasingly, once the Chinese began to consider themselves as one of the world’s great powers, the focus shifted onto “great power diplomacy” (*daguo waijiao*). China also intensely practiced public diplomacy and spread then President Hu Jintao’s (2003-2013) message of the peaceful rise of China, which many did not believe (*ibid.*). Under the present Chinese President Xi Jinping, China predominantly practices the “Wolf Warrior” form of diplomacy to show its global presence, military power, and economic strength.

During the pandemic, China has craftily played a role of benevolent aid donor and, simultaneously, of a combative superpower ready to bite back at critics. Explaining the country’s attitude, in May 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “We never pick a fight or bully others,

but at the same time, we have principles and guts... We will surely fight back against any malicious slander to defend national honour and dignity” (*The Straits Times*, 26th May 2020). This form of attitude is apparent in China unleashing a pack of “Wolf Warrior” diplomats who enthusiastically use twitter to defend and promote their country’s values and politics. Ironically, twitter is banned in mainland China (*ibid.*).

Diplomatically, in South Asia, taking the baton from India, China began leading the region to deal with the health emergency during the COVID-19 crisis. Since July 2020, China has hosted a series of meetings on a plan to combat the COVID-19, including the one with the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal; secondly, among the Vice-Foreign Ministers of China, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh; and thirdly, on fighting coronavirus and poverty alleviation at the Director-General level of all the six countries (*ThePrint*, 28th April 2021). The first meeting was held in July 2020, more than four months after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held an outreach meeting on 15th March 2021 with leaders from the South Asian countries in the wake of the spread of the COVID-19 in the region. In that meeting, Modi announced the setting up of a COVID-19 fund in which India made an initial contribution of US\$10 million (*India Today*, 28th July 2020).

In the July 2020 virtual meeting with his counterparts from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal, Wang Yi asked them to learn from Sino-Pakistan cooperation. To control the spread of the pandemic, Wang Yi asked them to “open up personnel “fast channels” and logistics “green channels” as soon as possible, strengthen joint prevention and control in border areas at land ports, and formulate jointly recognized standard operating procedures for epidemic notification, epidemic prevention management and control, and emergency handling” (*ibid.*). During the meeting, China also stressed that the four countries should

“actively promote the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the trans-Himalayan three-dimensional interconnectivity network, support the extension of [CPEC] to Afghanistan, and further release the regional interconnection dividend” (*ibid.*).

The second meeting was held in October 2020. It was attended by key foreign ministry officials from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. In that meeting, the five countries agreed to advance Belt and Road cooperation to “boost post-COVID-19 economic recovery and development” (*The Hindu*, 12th November 2020). They concurred that countries linked by land ports should establish joint response mechanisms in border areas, apart from committing to greater information sharing and international cooperation (*ibid.*).

On 27th April 2021, the foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka had a virtual conference. In that conference, Wang Yi said, “Faced with the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19, we worked together to fight the pandemic, protect the life and health of people, maintain public health and safety, boost economic growth, and jointly advance Belt and Road cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2021).

Wang Yi added, “China expresses deep sympathy for the raging pandemic in India and extends sincere condolences to the Indian people. China is ready to provide support and assistance to the Indian people at any time according to the needs of India. He hopes the meeting will help India fight against the pandemic.” (*ibid.*) During that conference, China put forth the following proposals for strengthening the anti-pandemic cooperation of the six countries (*ibid.*):

First, consolidate consensus on cooperation against the COVID-19 by carrying forward the Oriental tradition of “good neighbourliness” and demonstrating a firm resolve to fight against the virus.

Second, deepen practical cooperation in fighting against the COVID-19. China showed a willingness to promote vaccine cooperation with other countries through flexible methods such as free aid, commercial procurement, and the filling and production of vaccines under the six-country cooperation mechanism framework. People in South Asia are to have access to more diversified and stable vaccine supplies.

Third, promote post-pandemic economic recovery by implementing the “fast tracks” to facilitate essential travels and accelerate the unimpeded transport of goods through “green channels”. Also, there is a need to expand cooperation in new business forms such as digital economy, promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and help countries in the region march on the “fast lane” of economic recovery. China proposed establishing a China-South Asia poverty reduction and development cooperation centre to exchange experience and good practices in poverty reduction with other countries.

Fourth, maintain an international and regional environment that is conducive to the development of all countries. China said that it would stand firmly by justice and go with the historical trend of development. China said that it would work with other countries to defend the international system.

5. Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, foreign aid and assistance are politically motivated. Countries make donation with an expectation to draw political benefits. However, some scholars find that aid and assistance are driven by the donor country’s norms. In the case of China, as largely argued by the political realists, donation is a means to spread its political influence across the world. A fear is expressed that the Chinese

donations may debt-trap a greater number of countries. The case of Maldives is cited in this regard. Three months after Beijing's "non-favourite" candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, won the presidential elections in 2018, former President of Maldives and present Speaker of the Parliament, Mohamed Nasheed, claimed that the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, handed over an invoice for US\$3.2 billion, which is equivalent to about US\$8,000 for every citizen of the island country (*Business Standard*, 19th January 2019). On the contrary, China and Chinese scholars, mentioned above, argue that the country's aid policy is rooted in its norms.

Giving priority to its larger objective, as political realists find, or prioritizing norms, as the Chinese believe, China continued with its foreign aid policy even though there was a health crisis at home. Questions were raised by a section of its population on sending medicines and vaccines to other countries (Yu, 2020). In South Asia, China got a free space after India was forced to pause its aid. In large part of the 2020-21, the Chinese were helping India's neighbours to fight against the COVID-19 while engaging in political and military tensions with India. This dual policy, it seems, is mainly to widen the distance between New Delhi and its neighbouring countries, and to bring the South Asian capitals closer to Beijing.

Notes

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1. Zha Daojiong (2005), "China and foreign aid", Foreign Aid Workshop, 29th November 2005, Beijing (cited in Yeh, 2010: 19).
2. The five principles include: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence (Embassy of China in Turkey, 28th June 2004).

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