

## India's humanitarian assistance abroad: a domestic and foreign policy issue

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Although it has a strong civil society, India deploys its humanitarian aid mainly through bilateral and, gradually, multilateral channels. Rooted in a long-standing approach, indexed to both domestic and external policy objectives, this aid may be on the threshold of a transformation commensurate with this country-continent.

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Recent decades have seen a slow but steady rise in the role that Global South States, including India, have begun to play in responding to emergencies either by providing funds or sending supplies to affected countries. This assistance has included support in response to natural disasters, during long-term complex emergencies and support provided in post-conflict, post-disaster and pandemic situations. While engagement in humanitarian response is a relatively new facet of Indian foreign policy, Indian government support to other countries (much, but not all, of which is concentrated in neighbouring States) is not new. Indian overseas development assistance has indeed been an important part of Indian foreign policy since the country's Independence and is closely associated with foreign policy priorities particularly under a South-South Cooperation (SSC) framework. The past two decades have seen substantial increases in Indian bilateral aid; with this expansion has come increased support for international humanitarian response. In this article, the authors examine recent Indian efforts in this space, covering the period from 2018 onwards.

### Background on India's humanitarian assistance

Government of India (GoI)'s humanitarian assistance is listed as one of the forms of development support that the country extends to its partner countries across the world.<sup>1</sup> Research on its humanitarian support highlight the importance of Indian responses since the early 2000s, either through its military or its missions overseas, particularly to its immediate neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Historically, India began providing development assistance in various forms soon after it gained Independence,<sup>3</sup> and it has also provided support to countries that faced disasters before the period covered by this review. To take one example,

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 2021-22, 2022*.

<sup>2</sup> Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, "Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in India's national strategy", *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, January 2012, pp. 91–101, [https://idsa.in/system/files/jds\\_6\\_1\\_SarabjeetParmar.pdf](https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_6_1_SarabjeetParmar.pdf), and Saneet Chakradeo, *Neighbourhood first responder: India's humanitarian aid and relief*, The Centre for Social and Economic Progress, August 2020, <https://csep.org/policy-brief/neighbourhood-first-responder-indias-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief>

<sup>3</sup> Rachna Shanbog, *Enhancing the effectiveness of India's development partnership practices*, Global India EU's Horizon 2020 project, Policy Paper no.1, April 2020, <https://globalindia.eu/policy-paper/enhancing-the-effectiveness-of-indias-development-partnership-practices>

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) archival records show that an Indian overseas mission supplied relief assistance to the Peruvian government after the 1970 Ancash earthquake.<sup>4</sup>

With the country's economic growth, India's assistance budget and bilateral support to partner States started to increase in the late 1990s. Though this new phase of India's overseas development assistance programme has been extensively studied by scholars and discussed by foreign policy analysts, the general public in India has been mostly unaware of the country's bilateral contributions until recently.<sup>5</sup> While the substance of India's development assistance and its humanitarian response has been largely consistent between the current government led by Prime Minister Modi and its predecessors, the current government is much more forthright in its use of personal diplomacy and social media to promote the work that India is doing in this sphere to domestic audiences.<sup>6</sup>

At the institutional level, the main coordination work of providing humanitarian assistance was handled until recently by DPA II (Development Partnership Administration),<sup>7</sup> a division within the MEA.<sup>8</sup> DPA II managed the humanitarian work carried out during the initial wave of Covid-19. In July 2021, a new unit within the MEA was created under DPA IV called the Rapid Response Cell (RRC) with a new mandate to deal with Covid-19-related matters and the country's Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) programme more generally.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, a review of MEA's annual reports from earlier years highlights that prior to 2020-21 the concept of assistance and disaster relief was only used to describe the Indian armed force's humanitarian and rescue operations. The extension of the notion to cover all Indian government humanitarian assistance, together with new institutional arrangements, may signal an increased focus on humanitarian assistance by the Indian government moving forward.

The RRC within DPA IV (like its predecessor, DPA II) work alongside other GoI agencies including the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), Food Corporation of India (FCI), National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) and Armed Forces while delivering humanitarian support in response to a crisis.<sup>10</sup> The multiplicity of actors involved in HADR operations creates organisational and co-ordination challenges for the Indian government. In particular, one analyst has noted that decision-making processes within this space are quite opaque, making it difficult to understand the chain of command in such situations.<sup>11</sup> The MEA's annual report for 2021-22 acknowledges this to some extent, noting that "Indian HADR missions are complex interagency operations which require detailed planning and efficient execution". Case studies have highlighted that

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Letter from Chargé d'affaires, Mr P. A. Nazareth to MEA, Delhi*, 30 April 1971

<sup>5</sup> Tanoubi Ngangom and Urvashi Aneja, *Learning from the old, preparing for the new: Designing an institutional architecture for India's development partnerships*, Observer Research Foundation, March 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/learning-from-the-old-preparing-for-the-new-designing-an-institutional-architecture-for-indias-development-partnerships>

<sup>6</sup> Vihang Jumble and Christophe Jaffrelot, "How Twitter became the new medium for diplomacy", *The Indian Express*, 20 July 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-twitter-became-the-new-medium-for-diplomacy-8039843>, and Rachna Shanbog, *India's development assistance programme in Sri Lanka: The need to move from personal diplomacy to a white paper*, Global India EU's Horizon 2020 project, April 2020, <https://globalindia.eu/blog-indias-development-assistance-programme-in-sri-lanka-the-need-to-move-from-personal-diplomacy-to-a-white-paper>

<sup>7</sup> The Development Partnership Administration was created in 2012 to provide a framework for development assistance policies and programmes within the Ministry of External Affairs and currently consists of four sections - DPA I, II, III and IV

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2018-19, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2021-22... *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2020-21, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Vineet Thakur, "Round table series on India's international relations: Saffronising foreign policy", *Statecraft*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/round-table-series-on-india-s-international-relations-saffronising-foreign-policy>

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decisions on extending support are often taken by different institutions and people, including the prime minister (for example in the case of support to Nepal in the wake of the 2015 earthquake).<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, recent commentary on these challenges has argued that the MEA should spearhead the co-ordination of humanitarian response, given the mandate to lead on matters of foreign relations.<sup>13</sup> However, for the time being, it is fair to say that the Indian government's efforts at co-ordination in overseas humanitarian/disaster response remain a work in progress.

### The different facets of India's humanitarian assistance

India's humanitarian assistance has largely been provided in three contexts in recent years: conflict/post-conflict, in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster (such as earthquakes, failure of critical infrastructure, tsunamis and floods),<sup>14</sup> and support in addressing the challenges of Covid-19. For example, in March of this year, India sent approximately 60 tonnes of humanitarian supplies to Ukraine, including shelter materials, medical supplies, clothing and dignity kits.<sup>15</sup> In January 2021, India extended humanitarian support to Fiji after the island was hit by Cyclone Yasa.<sup>16</sup> Support from India in conflict situations has also been extended to countries such as Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan, while India has also responded to other disasters in Myanmar and Mozambique.<sup>17</sup> In recent remarks, India's external affairs minister stated that the country has become "more sensitive to global expectations"<sup>18</sup> as a result of its increased capability and is the first responder in many countries, especially in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Ways in which India has showcased its humanitarian support during the initial waves of the Covid-19 pandemic underscores the current Gol approach to "displaying greater conceptual and operational clarity" while conducting its foreign affairs.<sup>20</sup> In the financial year 2021-22, MEA's annual report highlighted India's Covid-19-related support to countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar and Fiji. In 2020-21, according to Gol, the country provided "free drugs, testing kits and Covid-19 protection gear to 82 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America".<sup>21</sup> Other support extended to "partner countries" to "fight against the pandemic" included the deployment of Rapid Response Medical Teams (from India's

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<sup>12</sup> Rachna Shanbog, *India's Development Partnership Policy: the contradictions of becoming a global player*, PhD thesis, Dublin City University, June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Centre for Social and Economic Progress, *Neighbourhood First Responder: India's Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief* (video), December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2sYrJ9M9sI>

<sup>14</sup> The Maldives has suffered from water shortages due to failure in their desalination water plant (critical infrastructure) on at least two occasions. India, together with other countries, has provided emergency assistance in response.

<sup>15</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Question no.3765 Humanitarian assistance to Ukraine*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/35060/QUESTION+NO3765+HUMANITARIAN+ASSISTANCE+TO+UKRAINE>

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India delivers humanitarian assistance & disaster relief support to Fiji after tropical cyclone Yasa*, 2 January 2021, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33360/India\\_Delivers\\_Humanitarian\\_Assistance\\_amp\\_Disaster](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33360/India_Delivers_Humanitarian_Assistance_amp_Disaster)

<sup>17</sup> This has included the provision of food supplies (grain) to Bangladesh to support Rohingya refugees who have fled violence in Myanmar as well as responding to natural disasters in Myanmar itself.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar at the event – "8 years of Modi government: Transforming external engagements"*, 7 June 2022, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35396>

<sup>19</sup> While MEA and Gol representatives more generally refer to India as the "first responder", it is important to acknowledge that most often it is the disaster-affected local organisations and affected country's government bodies that respond immediately after or during a crisis. "First international responder" would therefore be a more appropriate description.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar at the event – "8 Years..."*, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 2020-21...* *op. cit.*

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armed forces). These actions were carried out under Operation Sanjeevani.<sup>22</sup> Further, during this period, India also started a specialised information exchange platform for Covid-19 at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) level, called COINEX.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, as per the external affairs minister's statement on Twitter in April 2020,<sup>24</sup> medical training to people from other countries to deal with the pandemic was provided under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme in 2020-21.<sup>25</sup> During the same period, the GoI also began providing Indian-made Covid-19 vaccines (referred to as Vaccine Maitri)<sup>26</sup> to overseas partner countries.<sup>27</sup>

It is estimated that India lost nearly 2.7m people during the second wave of Covid-19 from April to July 2021.<sup>28</sup> There are multiple accounts of how the Indian government failed to take appropriate domestic preventive and protective measures or to adequately provide for its citizens during this time.<sup>29</sup> This paradox, where a government continues to extend humanitarian assistance to other countries despite facing such severe domestic challenges and needs is not unique to India. However, the juxtaposition of domestic needs and international response is perhaps starker in India's case than for many other international donors; the Indian government's continued willingness to provide such international assistance underscores the importance it ascribes to India being seen as a leading actor in the global aid architecture and as an emerging and distinctive power more generally.

A large share of India's development assistance flows (including humanitarian aid) into its immediate region (in South Asia), followed by its extended neighbourhood (Southeast Asia) and then to other regions in the world.<sup>30</sup> The table below provides an overview of some of the components of India's humanitarian aid as reported in various Indian government and Parliament documents and through social media between April 2018 to July 2022.

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<sup>22</sup> *Sanjeevani* in Hindi means immortality.

<sup>23</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, India, *Ministry of External Affairs, Covid-19 Pandemic – Global response, India's contribution and the way forward*, Thirteenth report, March 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Tweet by S. Jaishankar, 28 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1255144797121048577>

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Humanitarian assistance as development partnership*, <https://mea.gov.in/Humanitarian-Assistance-as-Development-Partnership.htm> This programme is one of India's longest lasting forms of ODA, having been established almost at the inception of Indian ODA. The use of the programme as part of humanitarian response is a new development.

<sup>26</sup> *Maitri* in Hindi means friendship.

<sup>27</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, India, *Ministry of External Affairs Demands for grants (2022-23)*, Twelfth report, March 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Nileena Suresh, "Covid-19 deaths in India could be 6 times above officially recorded deaths", *IndiaSpend*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.indiaspend.com/data-viz/covid-19-deaths-in-india-could-be-6-times-above-officially-recorded-deaths-799307>

<sup>29</sup> International Commission of Jurists, *How India's executive contributed to the devastation wrought by the second wave of COVID-19*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.icj.org/how-indias-executive-contributed-to-the-devastation-wrought-by-the-second-wave-of-covid-19>

<sup>30</sup> Rob Kevlihan and Rachna Shanbog, *Understanding India's humanitarian aid in the context of COVID-19*, Development Studies Association Ireland, 14 July 2020, <https://www.dsaireland.org/covid-19-resources/understanding-indias-humanitarian-aid-in-the-context-of-covi>

**Table – Summary of types of Indian humanitarian aid and related destinations (2018-2022)**

SUPPORT PROVIDED IN THE FORM OF:	EXAMPLES OF RECIPIENT COUNTRIES
<b>Food and grain</b>	Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan, Comoros, Madagascar, Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, Lebanon, Malawi and Eswatini
<b>Medicines, artificial limbs, and medical equipment (including ambulances)</b>	Mozambique, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, Madagascar, Swaziland, Kenya, Namibia, El Salvador, Zimbabwe, Comoros, Madagascar, Palestine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Armenia
<b>Vaccines</b>	Tanzania (polio), Covid-19 vaccines to approx. 51 countries
<b>Other relief supplies to citizens (non-food items)</b>	Cambodia, Vietnam, Fiji and Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>Other forms of support (restoration of waterworks in war affected area)</b>	Iraq

### Determinants of Indian humanitarian aid

India’s humanitarian support has been extended to countries in need for a variety of reasons. The government acknowledges the importance of the UN’s four fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. India is also a signatory to all four Geneva Conventions and participated in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. The SSC’s foreign policy principle also informs and prompts India’s humanitarian actions, with India often seeking to respond in accordance with the expressed needs of recipient country governments.

The current government has also frequently invoked certain values enshrined in Hinduism and Buddhism in recent years as part of its narrative on why it provides humanitarian aid. One of these values is *dharma* – which broadly translates as “righteousness”, implying that providing humanitarian support is “righteous conduct”.<sup>31</sup> This practice of using terms from religions founded in or around present-day India in its aid diplomacy contributes to the current government’s style of “engaging with Hinduism in diplomatic representation”.<sup>32</sup> This government has also been fervent in naming its humanitarian missions. For example, *Samudra Maitri*<sup>33</sup> was an operation that helped Indonesians during the October 2018 earthquake and tsunami; *Operation Insaniyat*<sup>34</sup> encompassed India’s support

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Statement by Foreign Secretary at the UN Security Council briefing on protection of civilians in armed conflict: Preserving humanitarian space*, 16 July 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34024/Statement+by+Foreign+Secretary+at+the+UN+Security+Council+Briefing+on+Protection+of+civilians+in+armed+conflict+Preserving+humanitarian+Space>

<sup>32</sup> Kira Huju, “Saffronizing diplomacy: the Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule”, *International Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 2, March 2022, pp. 423–441.

<sup>33</sup> *Samudra* means sea/ocean and *maitri* means friendship.

<sup>34</sup> *Insaniyat* in Hindi means humanity.

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to Rohingya populations during the September 2017 refugee influx in Bangladesh; Operation Sahayata<sup>35</sup> included support extended to Mozambique in 2019 after Cyclone Idai, Operation Vanilla was undertaken in Madagascar in 2020 after the floods and Operation Devi Shakti<sup>36</sup> included the evacuation of Indians and Afghan nationals in 2021 after the Taliban takeover. The use of operational names mostly in Hindi (as opposed to English) highlights how the government uses religious concepts and promotes the supremacy of the Hindi language in its foreign policy and the importance it places on the visibility of these international responses with key domestic audiences and constituencies.

Domestic considerations sit alongside more traditional foreign policy interests. Other reasons for providing assistance cited by officials include the maintenance of historical and friendly ties with recipient States and the fulfilment of obligations in some cases.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in the case of support to Fiji, Gol mentions that it provides assistance to the country since both countries share friendly historical ties and also as part of the Gol's 2019 Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative.<sup>38</sup> India's support in the form of wheat and rice has been described as "Grain diplomacy" in a Parliament Committee report.<sup>39</sup> Gol notes that this form of diplomacy has been "institutionalised for implementation" by the MEA. This, again, helps India in highlighting its importance in the region in ensuring food security in times of crises.<sup>40</sup> Claims of purely principled humanitarian responses, while not without some merit, should also be considered in the context of India's geopolitical interests. India often prioritises its immediate neighbourhood – in part reflecting its capacity to respond quickly there, but also reflecting its regional role as "big brother" to some neighbouring States as well as its antagonistic relations with Pakistan (particularly with respect to providing assistance to Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover), while competition with China remains an on-going consideration in India's ODA programme in general, including its humanitarian responses.<sup>41</sup>

### Aid rooted in tradition but set to reinvent itself?

India's humanitarian assistance mostly flows through bilateral channels. However, various Indian governments have also engaged with multilateral platforms. A recent collaboration with Australia (as part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group, QSD or Quad) while providing assistance to the Kingdom of Tonga is an example of such initiatives.<sup>42</sup> Aside from India's contribution through recently formed multilaterals such as the Quad, Gol also offered to pay US\$10m to the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund, along with other members.<sup>43</sup> Of the committed amount, India provided assistance of approximately US\$2.3m to neighbouring countries.<sup>44</sup>

India has also been working with UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) to deliver food and other

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<sup>35</sup> *Sahayata* in Hindi means help/support.

<sup>36</sup> *Devi* means goddess and *shakti* means power.

<sup>37</sup> Rob Kevlihan and Rachna Shanbog, *Understanding India's humanitarian aid...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Rob Kevlihan and Rachna Shanbog, *Understanding India's humanitarian aid...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, India, *Ministry of External Affairs Demands for grants...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Editorial, "It can be symbolic of a new India that it will not let anyone starve in South Asia", *The Indian Express*, 27 September 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/grain-diplomacy-india-food-supply-south-asia-7536142>

<sup>41</sup> Rachna Shanbog, *India's Development...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Tweet by Sarah Storey, 4 June 2022,

<https://twitter.com/AusDHCIndia/status/1532949579099910145?t=SMIBpA1HstsVbgMonMx2ug&s=19>

<sup>43</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, *COVID19 Emergency Fund*, <http://covid19-sdmc.org/covid19-emergency-fund>

<sup>44</sup> Lok Sabha Secretariat, India, *Ministry of External Affairs, Covid-19 Pandemic...*, *op. cit.*

humanitarian support over the past two decades. In recent years it has committed to “working with the international community to address global humanitarian challenges in an effective and comprehensive manner”, while continuing to advocate respect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.<sup>45</sup> The most recent example of India extending humanitarian support through UNOCHA and the Afghan Red Crescent Society is its earthquake relief assistance to Afghanistan in June 2022.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, with the help of the WFP, the country managed to deliver 2,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan in March 2022.<sup>47</sup>

Despite a strong domestic civil society, India does not support Indian non-governmental organisations in international humanitarian response (or, indeed, through its broader assistance programme). The majority of its support is directed through government-to-government channels, although opportunities for locally based NGOs to access support through Indian embassies on the ground can sometimes arise.

As Thakur says: “[The] Indian Foreign minister’s speeches on New India are often just tired repetitions to the old India, a mere crafting of the old diplomacy in new forms...”<sup>48</sup> The changes highlighted in this article, while noteworthy, build on the practices and policies of the past governments. Institutional reconfigurations have been accompanied by public relations efforts that often reframe and publicise approaches that are not that different from what has gone before. Nonetheless, the authors anticipate that India’s expanding role in world politics and more ambitious foreign policy objectives will be accompanied by new collaborative efforts with different partners in the coming years, influencing how and where it will provide humanitarian aid in the future.

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### Biographies

**Rachna Shanbog** • Rachna Shanbog recently completed her PhD from Dublin City University, Ireland. Her research focussed on India’s development assistance programme. She was awarded the Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship from 2017-2020. Before joining the PhD programme in 2017, Rachna had been working in the development sector in India for about nine years – including with UN Women, The Hunger Project (INGO) and other various organisations at the national level.

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<sup>45</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Statement by Foreign Secretary...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Earthquake relief assistance for the people of Afghanistan*, 24 June 2022, [https://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl%2F35440%2FEarthquake Relief Assistance for the people of Afghanist an=](https://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl%2F35440%2FEarthquake+Relief+Assistance+for+the+people+of+Afghanist+an=)

<sup>47</sup> Tweet by the official handle of MEA, Gol, 15 March 2022,

<https://twitter.com/MEAIndia/status/1503698861545570307?t=I3HGD98bVWxlc7dNgdbz5Q&s=19>

<sup>48</sup> Vineet Thakur, “Round table series on India’s...”, *art. cit*