

The country and topic presented in this sample position paper have been selected to give students an example of a *hypothetical* RCEP member-state and topic.

Country: India

Topic: COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution

I. Introduction

The sovereign Republic of India thanks its partners within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) for their continuing commitment to free trade in the East Asia Pacific (EAP) region through which all members may benefit. Though this partnership is a newcomer to the global stage, recent events have created ideal conditions for RCEP partners to benefit greatly from their membership. Paramount among these is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed millions and damaged the global economy in a way rarely seen before. India is grateful that its RCEP partners here today will consider the following proposal on COVID-19 vaccine distribution, and hopes that an agreement satisfactory to all parties may be reached to alleviate the suffering of millions.

II. The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since its discovery in late 2019, Coronavirus disease 2019 (hereafter known as COVID-19) has triggered an ongoing pandemic that has killed millions and resulted in the worst global economic crisis in nearly a century. To date, over 100,000,000 people have fallen ill with the disease and over 2,000,000 have died.¹ To alleviate the spread of the virus, most countries have implemented varying degrees of economic lockdowns, pushing millions out of work and forcing many more to adapt to a ‘new normal’ of at-home living.

This has had a drastic effect on the global economy. The International Monetary Fund estimates that global GDP shrunk by 4.4% in 2020, the worst contraction since the Great Depression of the 1930s.² On paper, the EAP region escaped much of this contraction, growing by .9%. However, a closer look reveals that this growth was fueled entirely by China, which grew by 2% while the rest of the region contracted by 3.5%.³ According to a report published by the World Bank, this contraction has the potential to reduce EAP regional growth over the next decade by 1% per year.⁴

In terms of its effect on human life, the pandemic has been no kinder. The amount of people living in poverty in the EAP grew by an estimated 38 million in 2020, fueled by lost earnings and reduced spending in hard-hit countries. The collapse of international tourism has had an outsized impact in the EAP, where many countries have cultivated reputations as tourist hotspots. In India, tourism accounts for a full 10% of GDP, which has been lost to the pandemic.

India conducts a large amount of trade with its geographic neighbors. For all of the reasons stated above, the pandemic has slashed regional trade and negatively affected the revenue of all

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225>

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/east-asia-pacific-economic-update>

⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/east-asia-pacific-economic-update>

countries involved. It is therefore in India's best interest to ensure a swift recovery from the pandemic. Through this, India as well as its partners at RCEP will reap the rewards of increased trade, improved economies, and a healthier, happier populace.

III. COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution: Challenges and Opportunities

A number of vaccines designed to inoculate against COVID-19 have passed clinical trials and are now being distributed worldwide. The need to quickly vaccinate the majority of the global population represents a logistical challenge unlike any that have come before, and one that could be greatly expedited through multilateral cooperation. At the core of this challenge is the need to store vaccines in a cold environment in order to maintain effectiveness. The Comirnaty vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech must be stored at -70 degrees Celsius; the vaccine developed by American pharmaceutical company Moderna will quickly become ineffective if exposed to temperatures greater than -20 Celsius. Vaccines developed by RCEP members, such as China's CoronaVac or India's Covaxin, remain effective at regular refrigerator temperatures of around four degrees Celsius.

Because these vaccines require cold temperatures to maintain effectiveness, it is imperative that regional supply chains be equipped to maintain vaccine viability throughout storage, transportation, and administration. This "cold-chain distribution" can be challenging for nations that lack the required logistical infrastructure, such as specialized refrigerator trucks and ultra-cold storage facilities. Trade policies can be crafted that allow for regional cooperation on the construction of such facilities and the distribution of vaccines. Such policies could help by improving communication between border agents and health regulatory authorities, eliminating import fees and tariffs, and setting terms for cross-border refrigerator truck usage to assist with 'last-mile' vaccine delivery.⁵ This last point is particularly important, given that many RCEP partners host large rural populations. Indeed, nations such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia score low on the Logistics Performance Index with scores of 2.3, 2.58, and 2.7, respectively. These nations may require additional help from larger partners to house and distribute vaccines.

For the reasons stated above, India will support the creation of a comprehensive policy to ensure all RCEP members have the resources necessary to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine. India is in a strong position to supply the needed doses, being one of the world's largest vaccine producers. Additionally, India's prior vaccination campaigns, particularly that against measles-rubella in 2017, have taught it important lessons about distributing vaccines in far-flung and geographically problematic regions. It would be happy to assist its partner countries in navigating similarly challenging circumstances. Finally, India's domestically-produced vaccines can be maintained at a higher temperature than most, making them easier to distribute.

It is only by acting as a unified body that India and its honorable partners can re-ignite the economic activity that has until now been suppressed by the pandemic. India does not wish for such a policy to come with strings attached; in particular, it is not interested in opening its borders to additional Chinese imports. By working together in a way that only they can, there is no reason that the members of this organization cannot reach an agreement that is beneficial for all.

IV. Conclusion

India reiterates its gratitude to its partners within this organization for carefully considering its position on this critical issue, and hopes to continue working to advance policies that benefit all of those involved in the RCEP partnership.

⁵ https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news20_e/covid_20nov20_e.htm