

Responding to the new COVID-19 sub-variants

It is four years since the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV, later renamed as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 or SARS-CoV2) was first reported on December 31, 2019 from China. In the months which followed, it caused severe COVID-19 waves in nearly every country, across the world. Alongside, at end December or early new year, there would be news of a new variant or sub-variant, or of a surge in cases in some countries. At the end of 2021, it was an Omicron variant (BA.1.1.529), and by the end 2022, the COVID-19 case surge in China made news. Now, a new subvariant of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the JN.1, is making news.

Virus behaviour

The JN.1 sub-variant of Omicron has been reported from multiple countries and designated as a variant of interest (VoI) by the World Health Organization. This has raised some concerns and caused some worries. But is it really cause for concern? The short answer is a no. The reason is that the reporting of a new variant or sub-variant is on expected lines. In fact, in May 2023, while declaring the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO had highlighted the need for continuous tracking of the virus and its variants. The rationale was simple. The pandemic is over, but SARS-CoV-2 was and is circulating in all countries and all settings and will continue to do so for long, and possibly forever. That is how most viruses behave. Therefore, there is always the possibility of some seasonal changes in the number of cases, at unpredictable intervals. A linked feature is that the genetic material of the circulating viruses – especially of the respiratory virus – keeps changing over a period. These changes in genetic structure (genome) result in the designation of new variants and sub-variants.

Since the reporting of the novel virus in 2019, more than 1,000 subvariants and recombinant sub-lineages have been reported. Against this backdrop, the emergence of JN.1 is not surprising. However, every change in genome does not matter, and the international agencies and subject experts are on task to assess the risk. However, if mutations or genetic changes result in an alternation in the characteristics of the virus (such as higher transmission, more severe disease or immune escape from vaccine induced or natural immunity), it merits greater attention. The variants are then termed as VoI or variants of concern (VoC). At present, there is no VoC in circulation in any part of the world. On March 16, 2023, WHO's Technical Advisory Group on



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It is time we handle SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 just like any other respiratory illness: it is more of an individual health concern now

SARS-CoV-2 Virus Evolution had downgraded the Omicron as the 'previous' variants of concern. However, national and global agencies are tracking the virus and JN.1 has been designated as VoI.

JN.1 has been designated a VoI, which means it has some genetic changes and indicative characteristics in circulating viruses which need to be monitored by the health agencies and government. Such a designation is a call to step up genomic sequencing scientific work and use data to track the virus. JN.1 is not a new virus but a sub-variant of BA.2.86, which itself is a subvariant of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2. Till now, there is no evidence that JN.1 causes more severe disease or causes immune escape and is, thus, not a reason for worry. In short, designating a variant as VoI does not automatically mean there is a reason to worry.

Till now, there is no evidence that JN.1 is responsible for severe disease or immune escape. In fact, the waste-water surveillance in some Indian cities had indicated that the new sub-variant has circulated to a majority of the population without major change in reported or clinical cases in the way of a 'silent wave'.

The vaccine response

Does it mean we need to get additional shots of COVID-19 vaccines? Current scientific evidence supports that vaccines and natural infection continue to provide protection from any sub-variant, though there is some possibility of a decline in protection, as time has lapsed since the last vaccination. Immunologically, the natural infections which have happened in addition to vaccine shots, have provided hybrid immunity to people in India and many countries. Therefore, there is no immediate reason to worry. There is no scientific evidence to support having a fourth shot of COVID-19 vaccines, for any age group.

We also need to interpret the rise in COVID-19 cases in India more carefully. The spike in COVID-19 cases in India could be more artificial than real. It is likely that ramped up COVID-19 testing is picking more cases. Then, some deaths are being attributed to COVID-19. However, there is no evidence that those deaths are causally linked to SARS-CoV-2. These appear to be in the individuals who were already sick and had COVID-19, as an incidental finding. The average five or six deaths in a day in India also need to be considered in perspective.

To put this in context, every day in India, an estimated 27,000 people die due to a range of reasons that include old age. In contrast,

respiratory diseases and tuberculosis kill 50 to 60 times more people every day than COVID-19 now. We need to shift attention to preventable deaths due to many other reasons.

Act responsibly

Yet, four years should help us to learn. The government's COVID-19 response and actions should be more nuanced and informed by all evidence and real time data. Citizens need to act responsibly and not share unverified social media messages or forwards. Science communication from the government needs to be more interactive, and public communication messaging should be more routine and easy to understand. There is a possibility scenario where reported COVID-19 cases may increase slightly in the days ahead, or in the months ahead – as it happened in April 2023 when daily cases had spiked.

However, for most circulating respiratory viruses including SARS-CoV-2, mere transmission or an increase in cases is not an immediate concern. Right now, SARS-CoV-2 infections do not appear to change clinical outcomes in any age groups.

How should we respond to current or any future uptick due to SARS-CoV-2? The short answer is in the same way that we respond to any seasonal rise in cases of flu, respiratory illnesses or dengue virus. By the government increasing standard public health preventive measures such as Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (SARI) and Influenza-like Illness (ILI) surveillance, waste water surveillance and improving provision of required services at health facilities. The clinical management should focus on a syndromic approach to respiratory illnesses. At the individual and community levels, there is no need to disturb the routine or change your travel or vacation plans. People with cough and cold or flu-like illness must follow good respiratory etiquette such as wearing masks in public places, covering their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing and frequent handwashing, irrespective of whether it is a type of SARS-CoV-2, seasonal flu or any other respiratory illness. It is proven that the risk to children is the lowest among any age group and thus, school closure should never be considered an option in response to a COVID-19 case surge.

It is time we handle SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 just like any other respiratory illness. It is more of an individual health concern than a public health concern. COVID-19 is not a novel virus any more and is here to stay. But it is not a reason to worry.

The views expressed are personal

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Reigniting the flame of India-Korea defence cooperation

In the intricate tapestry of global geopolitics, defence collaboration emerges as a foundational imperative, crucial for the preservation of international peace and stability. The recent diplomatic overture during the visit of General Manoj Pande, Chief of the Army Staff of India, in November 2023, to the Republic of Korea, signifies a critical juncture in the trajectory of India-Korea defence relations. While this visit fortified diplomatic ties, it also unveiled the challenges, necessitating meticulous consideration. This prompts an exploration of the challenges faced by India and Korea in enhancing their defence cooperation, along with an examination of opportunities for mutual growth.

Despite recent high-level engagements, a challenge that persists is the absence of a shared vision for a new comprehensive defence framework, one that can provide a robust structure under which both nations can operate and align their policies to construct a novel and sustainable emerging regional order. The imperative for India and Korea is to transcend the confines of bilateral cooperation, and embrace a paradigm shift that cultivates a more profound understanding of their roles in the swiftly evolving global scenario.

Korean view of India's regional role

A hurdle lies in the resistance on the Korean government side to reassess India's role in the region. It is incumbent upon Korea to comprehend that India is not merely the largest consumer of defence products. Rather, it stands as a regional power capable of substantial contributions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. A departure from Cold War mentalities, where the Korean government perceived India as standing in the opposite Soviet bloc, is imperative for Korea to forge a deeper, more meaningful partnership with India. This paradigm shift in Korean government strategic thinking is indispensable for any meaningful engagement between the two nations.

Further, the prevailing overemphasis by the



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Indian government side on weapons acquisition and technology transfer from Korea, while undeniably pivotal, has tended to overshadow broader strategic considerations. Similarly, the unwavering focus of the Korean defence establishment on profit-driven weapons sales to India, devoid of strategic considerations, may prove shortsighted in the face of fast-changing geopolitical dynamics. Powerful arms lobbies in India and Korea pose a potential roadblock, emphasising the necessity to prioritise long-term strategic goals over short-term gains.

The emerging coalition of North Korea, China, and Russia poses a new serious challenge to collaborative efforts between the two nations. Divergent stances may arise, necessitating a nuanced appraisal of each party's strategic imperatives.

The high-level interactions of Gen. Pande with the top Korean military leadership and his engagements with the leadership of top Korean defence institutions, such as the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) and the Agency of Defence Development (ADD), are anticipated to further unite the defence communities of both countries.

Explore technological collaborations

Leveraging their technological capabilities, India and South Korea are aiming to collaborate in developing advanced defence systems and equipment. Given their shared understanding of the pivotal role technology will play in future conflicts, the scope for cooperation in this sector is limitless. Such synergy can lead to a mutually beneficial defence technology and industry partnership, propelling both countries to the forefront of innovation and self-reliance.

In an era where defence against space warfare, information warfare, and cybersecurity is paramount, both nations can further explore opportunities for cooperation. Given Korea's status as an advanced high-tech digital superpower, vast opportunities exist in the development of robust security measures in these

areas to effectively counter emerging threats in the digital domain, ensuring the security of critical infrastructure and information.

Strengthening coordinated efforts to counter terrorism aligns seamlessly with the shared concerns of India and South Korea. There is potential for collaboration in maritime security, including joint patrolling and information sharing, given the significant maritime interests both countries have in the Indian Ocean.

Peacekeeping and exercises

India and South Korea can leverage their United Nations peacekeeping expertise for collaborative efforts. Sharing insights and resources in peacekeeping operations can enhance regional and global stability, underscoring their joint commitment to peace and security. Additionally, joint exercises and the exchange of best practices in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) demonstrate the shared responsibility of both nations in addressing vulnerabilities to natural disasters.

Lastly, mutual growth is found in enhancing joint army exercises, fostering interoperability, and strengthening the capabilities of both armies for effective collaboration in diverse scenarios. Gen. Pande's visit to Seoul has spurred the extension of cooperation beyond naval focus to other branches of India's armed forces.

While the recent visit of Gen. Pande has reignited the flame of India-Korea defence cooperation, the path forward necessitates meticulous navigation through the challenges and the wholehearted embrace of opportunities. A strategic, balanced approach, coupled with adaptability to the evolving geopolitical landscape is key to unlocking a robust and enduring defence collaboration, in turn creating a partnership that fosters peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. United, both nations stand ready to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the future, forging a path toward a stronger and more resilient partnership.

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