

The Modi Initiative: Can COVID-19 Resuscitate the SAARC?

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Summary

The initiative by Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi to conduct a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) video conference on confronting COVID-19 as a common threat may not immediately resuscitate the moribund SAARC. However, the initiative and the supporting regional leaders deserve praise for the effort, which might help the process.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the regional association of the South Asian states, has been in the doldrums over the past half decade. Pakistan was to assume the Chairmanship from Nepal and host its 19th Summit in 2016. However, India announced its boycott following the attack in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir, and consequently the meeting had to be postponed indefinitely.

Bilateral relations soured even further following the abrogation by the Indian government of Article 370, which had accorded special status to Jammu and Kashmir. The adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019 and the riots in New Delhi led to demonstrations in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, two countries in South Asia with the closest links to India. Indeed, the public reaction was so negative in Bangladesh that a planned visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dhaka as Chief Guest to the centenary of the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 17 March 2020 had to be called off, even though COVID-19 was cited as the official reason.

If social media is any yardstick of public emotions, intra-national relations in South Asia seemed to have reached their nadir. Embattled at home by domestic issues, Modi's reputation in the wider region, in terms of his management of India's diversity, amongst other things, was at an all time low.

To the credit of the native sagacity of this intensely politically savvy politician, Modi perceived the possible political mileage to be derived from this malaise sweeping the globe. Already, using COVID-19 as an excuse to defer the visit to Bangladesh came as a great relief to both governments, providing both Dhaka and Delhi a face-saving way out of an impasse. The consequences of a visit to Bangladesh in the face of massive public displeasure, even if the government was willing to conform to every canon of protocol civility, could otherwise have had negative ramifications for a politician whose pride lay in his mesmerising personal political profile. Modi picked up Dhaka's hints nonchalantly and then broadened the possible role of COVID-19 in an endeavour to achieve a greater goal – that of projecting himself and India as a harbinger of cohesion against a common threat!

Modi proposed a video-conference among SAARC nation leaders to formulate a common strategy to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Modi, significantly, is not the current Chairman of SAARC; indeed, he had been instrumental in denying Pakistan the position; yet, like motherhood, the call was not one that could elicit negativity from either friends or foe. A judicious Modi took care to praise the medical qualifications of the Pakistani delegate, even

though Islamabad had displayed less than full support to the initiative by sending a junior minister (of Health) when all other participants were heads of government.

The video-conference on 15 March 2020, as Modi said, showed “a coming together” rather than “growing apart” of the regional countries when confronted with a common non-traditional threat such as the current pandemic. While it is true that the number of detected cases in South Asia was barely over 200, with 107 in India itself, the countries nevertheless face the potentiality of being overwhelmed should a spread occur, as all had severe resource constraints. This was also a genuine issue where collaboration was required and no one could scoff it away as a political gimmick. The event was attended, observing the safe measure of ‘social distancing’ being practised in the affected countries, with the leaders sitting and speaking from their respective capitals: Modi from Delhi, President Ibrahim Mohammed Solih from Male, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa from Colombo, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from Dhaka, Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli from Kathmandu, Prime minister Lotay Tshering from Bhutan and State Minister Zafar Mirza from Islamabad.

So, will the initiative expand regional cooperation? The immediate short answer is ‘yes’. As leaders intervened, Hasina presented a very practical proposal, suggesting that the health secretaries and experts from all SAARC countries should coordinate and monitor the curb of COVID-19 via video conference. The enthusiastic acceptance of this idea ensured that this was not a ‘one-off’ event and that this SAARC activity would continue. This was also in conformity with the initial philosophical concept of the SAARC. The idea underlying the SAARC’s birth was to create linkages at mundane working levels so that eventually the more complex problems at the central levels could be diffused. Modi provided economic meat to his political initiative by proposing a Covid Emergency Fund, which he launched himself by committing US\$10 million (S\$14 million). He also sought the consideration of an Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal to detect affected patients and contact tracing.

Ironically, founded on the fundamental notions of European ‘functionalism’, the SAARC as of now seems to be doing a better job than Europe in confronting the crisis. The European Union’s (EU) largest country, Germany, has attracted criticism by refusing to provide essential gear to affected Italy when China came to its rescue. The EU countries are all going at it alone.

How sustainable is Modi’s new SAARC initiative? Can it resuscitate a SAARC currently in ‘intensive care’? It is too soon to tell. However, it is not too soon to give the initiative and the participating leaders the plaudits that are due to them.

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