

SAARC-ASEAN: Post-COVID-19 Relationship

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a great opportunity for the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to strengthen their relationship in areas such as trade, digital economy, security and social issues.

The world is going through a difficult, uncertain and unpredictable time. The COVID-19 has put the lives of billions of people at risk, resulting in over 12 million cases and killing more than half a million people around the world so far. The consequences have been devastating with global order uncertainty and economic recession. It has affected the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, increasing the threat of food security, gender violence and disruption in education as well as rising issues of traditional and non-traditional security. This situation is partly attributed to the lack of a global leadership and shortcomings in global cooperation and international organisations's ability to formulate a global response to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

As most of members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are developing countries, their sufferings are severe due to the higher levels of poverty compared to the developed countries. On top of this is the security issue, arising out of conflicts at the land border in South Asia or the sea in the South China Sea.

Given this fast-changing uncertain global and regional context, it is timely to reinvigorate the bilateral relationship between SAARC and ASEAN so as to strengthen their cooperation and promote their roles and voices in the world arena. Both organisations share a traditional relationship starting with the first ministerial meeting in 1998, and agreeing to hold annual meetings thereafter. The areas of cooperation have been expanded from four key areas of cooperation in 2002, including free trade agreements (FTA), HIV/AIDS, tourism and poverty alleviation to cover larger areas as recorded in the Work Plan 2008-2009 like trade and investment, energy, health, agriculture, tourism, drugs and trans-national crimes and poverty alleviation. This traditional relationship lays a firm foundation for further cooperation between the two parties.

Currently, the two organisations share similar challenges caused by the pandemic and can work together to overcome them. Now, with South Asia becoming a new COVID-19 hotspot, while Southeast Asia has more than 170,000 cases, both regions suffer to some extent the negative impacts of the disease.

By upholding the principles of consensus and non-interference in domestic affairs, ASEAN and SAARC should accelerate cooperation with each other for mutual benefit. While it is essential for the two regions to combat COVID-19, they must also find solutions for

economic recovery and cope with rising security issues. Depending on policy priorities, certain activities could be mapped by short-, medium- and long-term outlooks.

Short-term Outlook: Although it seems that the worst part of the global economic recession is over, it is not certain when economies will return to normal. ASEAN and SAARC could cooperate in such economic areas as the reduction of tariffs on key pharmaceutical ingredients, which are essential for COVID-19 treatment. This is important in the context of India deciding not to be part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. So, the two regions will need to establish a new channel of economic cooperation. This is also in line with the new trend of shifting the supply chain away from China and regionalism.

ASEAN supports trade liberalisation and an open policy which are key to its member countries' development. It is ready to share its experiences with the SAARC-member countries. ASEAN should, of course, also learn from South Asia, as now is the time to consider the balance between open markets, interdependence and enhancing the economic resilience and autonomy.

Another potential area for cooperation is the digital economy, which was strongly promoted during COVID-19 to ensure social distancing. As SAARC and ASEAN-member countries, especially India and Singapore, have advantages in digital and information technology, this would open a new area of cooperation between the two blocs and regions.

With a high risk of bankruptcies due to the negative impact of COVID-19, cooperation should also include sharing information, data, experiences and best practices related to containing the spread as well as measures to support the people, especially those who cannot work or conduct business.

Mid-term Outlook: The focus here is on security issues, given the possibility of a prolonged global recession. Although the full economic impact has not yet been felt, there is a high chance that new crimes may appear. These could include money laundering, smuggling or challenges related to new technology such as cyber-crime, cyber-attacks, data fraud, hacking and fake news. Hence, ASEAN and SAARC could work together to fight cybercrime.

Long-term Outlook: This mainly concerns social issues. As the most vulnerable groups, children and women are expected to suffer the most from this pandemic. It is, therefore, necessary to look at cooperation in issues such as gender violence, gender inequality and rights of children. Other social concerns may emerge such as organised crime.

The pandemic has caused much difficulty for ASEAN- and SAARC-member states. However, it has provided opportunities for cooperation. The successful containment of the pandemic and economic recovery will depend on how the regional partners look for opportunities for cooperation. In this instance, ASEAN and SAARC can map out joint efforts and priorities to take advantage of the opportunities and overcome challenges posed COVID-19.

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