COVID-19 BATTLE REVITALIZED SAARC IN 2020; MOMENTUM SHOULD NOT BE LOST

Coronavirus emergency brought together these South Asian nations as they reposed trust in SAARC. Thus, the pandemic delivered a promising indication of revitalization, writes Harsh Mahaseth & Saumya Pandey for South Asia Monitor

The coronavirus pandemic has made a social, political, and economic impact in the SAARC nations. South Asian countries had to resort to full lockdown, arrests of violators, sealing of borders, and disciplined social distancing, resulting in an extensive internal migration since the pandemic started to unveil in the region.

The region comprises over 21 percent of the world's population which remains vulnerable to COVID-19. The member states have reported 88,56,017 cases, a total of 1,33,969 deaths in the region, and 79,23,759 recovered cases till the third week of December.

**COVID 19: SAARC’s biggest challenge**

The pandemic has become SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) biggest challenge at the moment, as it impacts not only public health but also the national economies of member states. According to the World Bank’s South Asia Economic Focus, the region will experience the worst economic performance in 40 years. The report also warns that the disruption of supply chains will adversely affect food security and reinforce inequalities. While South Asia appears to be taking charge of the situation shoulder-to-shoulder, a calibrated approach is missing. Logistics in all countries will be majorly affected, and there is no solution in that direction yet. Given the divergent economic capabilities and infrastructure across the region, some members will need greater assistance over others. There are no provisions or workable modules for the industry to produce amidst public health emergency situations and hence it has severely disrupted the production lines, including that of essential supplies, too.

The lack of consensus has been a major impediment in the working of the eight-member SAARC. Pakistan was not on board with the recent SAARC initiatives. Security issues between India and Pakistan, moreover, have derailed cooperation for a long time. Since the inception of SAARC, the India and Pakistan rivalry has continued to fester, and other nations are paying a huge price for this.

For the first time in the history of SAARC, it witnessed coordinated efforts by its member states. As the pandemic began and started impacting the region, India made sure to extend its help to its neighbouring South Asian countries and spearheaded efforts to empower SAARC - which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka - to coordinate regional response and pool funds to set up an emergency fund to fight COVID.

However, the constant tussle between India and Pakistan is obstructing the member nations from utilizing the fund. It has been reported that due to their current disagreement over the disbursement of the fund, Nepal’s request for laboratory and medical equipment has been delayed.

**Mutual distrust among SAARC countries**

The nationalist outlook prevails over the international outlook among the South Asian states. Excessive nationalism among members is one of the major obstacles in SAARC's slow progress. It has been observed in the course of time that the creators of SAARC focused on expanding mutual cooperation in the socio-economic and cultural fields, excluding political issues. But even with such an apolitical perspective, there are political differences between South Asian countries, and attempts to expand cooperation in the non-political field have not been materialized, especially given the current political turmoil.

In fact, it is difficult to reach a consensus among the political leaders of the South Asian countries as there are fundamental differences in their political system. Besides, earlier, the neo-colonial foreign states like the US had committed themselves to pursue colonial interests by keeping the mutual distrust and animosity among the states of the South Asian region. The US has previously used Pakistan as a spearhead to reduce India's influence in the region. Thus, often the indirect intervention of foreign states has become a thorn in the smooth running of the SAARC. It is interesting to point out that in the wake of the recent China-Indian border clash, the US is mobilizing troops in Asia.

**Has SAARC failed to achieve its purpose?**

The pandemic has also not stopped Pakistan's all-powerful 'deep state' from exporting terror to India. The Pakistan Army has been routinely flouting the ceasefire along the Line of Control, resorting to heavy firing to help terrorists cross over to India.

India and Pakistan is the two largest partners in the SAARC. As a result of a lasting animosity developed between them, they cannot trust each other at all. Pakistan has repeatedly tried to raise the issue of Kashmir in SAARC meetings ignoring the SAARC Charter. The tensions between the two rivals have caused great damage to SAARC cooperation. The lingering Kashmir issue also remained a great hurdle in the process of progress and cooperation. As a result of mutual distrust and excessive animosity between these two states, Pakistan has now clearly demonstrated that it has no interest in reviving SAARC unless it can use it as yet another forum to continue its tirade against India.

Therefore, it is not wrong to hold that SAARC has failed to achieve desired progress due to an environment of disputes and mistrust. It is necessary to settle regional disputes through dialogue and compromise. The political will of all the SAARC members is an utmost important requirement in establishing peaceful co-existence and building interdependence mutually amongst them at the times of need. India should give a lead in that direction.

**Can SAARC collectively do anything to combat the pandemic?**

Coronavirus emergency brought together these South Asian nations as they reposed trust in SAARC. Thus, the pandemic delivered a promising indication of revitalization. On March 15, 2020, SAARC members held a video conference to examine measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Led by India, the gathering was attended by all the heads of government of these nations, with the exception of Pakistan. Its health minister attended the meet. A COVID-19 emergency fund, which was based on voluntary contributions from all the SAARC countries, was set up, with India pledging $10 million. The gathering additionally promised to utilize existing organizations like the SAARC Disaster Management Center, to share best practices and encourage data sharing by setting up an Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal, just like a research platform to facilitate research on pandemic control.

Nonetheless, the gatherings got the remainder of the part states together and widened the support, raising trust in an institutional structure for the wellbeing and security in South Asia.

**SAARC needs to jointly identify ways for sustainable development**

It would be pertinent to mention that to deal with the COVID-19 situation, SAARC countries should jointly identify new ways and means to sustain. The region now has an opportunity to come together to remove tariffs on medical devices, protective gear, disinfectants and soap, and they have started to do so, but most importantly they should expand intra-regional trade until normal trade channels are fully restored.

In order to effectively shield the region from the pandemic’s damaging consequences, SAARC needs to come together as an organization and adopt a policy-driven approach for a parallel developmental target of all SAARC nations.

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