

India and SAARC Combating COVID Pandemic

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Background

Undoubtedly, Covid 19 pandemic has taken the entire world by a cruel surprise and has thrown it off balance. Though, currently, not the worst hit but weighing on the scale of human development index (HDI), health, hygiene and per capita income, the South Asian region may witness some of the unfathomable criticalities lest it sets its house in order. There is no denying the fact that all the countries in the South Asian region have a fragile economy and poor health and sanitation. A covid-19 pandemic may further exacerbate this state leading to massive scale unemployment and inflation hitting the roof.

On March 15 2020, India held meeting with the head of SAARC nations to deliberate upon the challenges of COVID 19 in the region and feasible way out. In round two, there was a video conference meeting between the Health Ministry official to discuss the best practices in the joint effort to fight the pandemic. Last week, India initiated the conference of Commerce Ministry officials of all the SAARC nations.[i] The objective of the meeting of Commerce Ministry officials was to identify ways and means to "sustain and expand".[ii]

This article will discuss challenges faced by all the countries in the region in the wake of covid-19 pandemic and how India's endeavor is bringing all the nations together in combating the pandemic. It will elaborate upon how to India is taking measures to meet the sudden rise in demand for medical equipment and also to save the dwindling economy.

Introduction

Apart from Defence and Security, health has now become a new strategic issue in a country's foreign policy. Reason for the health sector to jump up in the ranking of national priorities seems imminent. It might lead to affecting relationships, both at bilateral and at the multilateral platform of the region.

While discussing health at domestic and global platforms, there has been contemplation on the trade of vaccines and medicines, and on curbing the spread of diseases like SARS, Ebola, HIV.[iii] There has been an expression of threats merging from bioterrorism which might affect the health of the population and the challenges in overcoming those health hazards. For example, with some degree of similarity, the 2001 Anthrax attack in the U.S. where many people were directly affected who came in contact with the contaminated individual[iv]. Anthrax did create a state of panic in the world and for the United States, especially. These reiterate the significance of health in the diplomacy of the country.

Interestingly, Covid-19 pandemic has given a political profile to health. Because every country, including the most powerful ones, are also using their diplomatic channels to address the challenge posed by the virus.

Changing Dynamics of Multilateralism

The definition of multilateralism has revived and found new importance due to coronavirus crises in the South Asian region. As seen in the past, about cooperation amongst SAARC nations, there was a lack of cooperation, balance, harmony and understanding due to past experiences.

However, with Covid spreading its tentacles rapidly in the region, there is a shared sense of urgency and fear amongst the nations. SAARC, as a regional organisation has begun to find relevance in the current scenario. SAARC countries under the leadership of India, have agreed to come "On Screens" to formulate a plan to fight against the fast-spreading Covid-19 virus in the region. SAARC nations have pledged to contribute towards improving their economy and health in multilateral arrangements, keeping aside their differences.

It encouraged all the SAARC member countries to contribute voluntarily towards an emergency fund which will be utilised in addressing the problems of coronavirus. India initiated the fundraising by contributing 10 million USD, and this initiative was accepted by all the members of SAARC except for Pakistan. The Covid-19 Emergency Fund has totaled up to \$18.8 million so far. A rather meagre percentage of their total economy but at least a beginning was made.

Challenges Posed by the Pandemic

1. Unemployment

Economic slowdown due to spread of coronavirus is causing collateral damage on multiple fronts which is adversely impacting the lives and livelihood of the population of the countries in the region.

Unemployment is one of the most significant threats that the region is likely to experience. The worst-hit, in this case, will be the '*Blue Collar*' jobs (manual, daily wagers, labors) as their employment rate graph looks curvy, with the likelihood of people coming back on the jobs are austere. Whereas the employment graph of the '*white-collar*' (managerial, administrative) presently looks like a "V" shape indicating that those working from home can come back to the job once the pandemic is controlled.

However, there is also an apprehension that certain U.S. based firms in India will soon start cutting down on its employees' to address unemployment issue arisen there. For example, Fareportal, a U.S. based firm, sacked hundreds of its employees working in Delhi and Pune.[v]

Chances of scaling down workforce from the U.S. based firms will occur frequently given the fact that the U.S. itself is touching the bar of the unemployment rate at 4.4 per cent in March, highest since the year 2017.[vi] Unemployment can be a severe challenge to the government of India, given that its current unemployment rate is already touching 7.7 per cent.

2. Impact on the Industries

Some of the most affected industries all over South Asia are automobile, pharmaceuticals, electronics and chemical products. Some are facing supply issue, and some have no exporting outlet. For instance, India is falling short of masks and medical gowns, whereas Bangladesh has an abundance of textile production. In such a scenario, India can help Bangladesh find a suitable market in South Asia. India can use its cotton industry to produce swabs and supply them to countries like Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

3. Food Security Crisis

It has been experienced in the past also how food crisis emerged, with an increase in oil prices, rising use of food grains and trade policy failures. Therefore, there is a need to monitor food prices and markets closely. Transparency over the exchange of information at the right time will help the government to manage the food market, guide farmers to make rational production decisions in the present and future scenarios. It is also necessary to ensure that agricultural food supply chains function as usual both at national and international level. For this, in the case of India, the government should help farmers in procuring chemicals and fertilisers, which they are not able to access due to the road and border lockdowns. India also needs to ensure the smooth running of the green channel for fresh farm supply of vegetables and dairy products.

4. Shortage of Medical Equipment

Health ministries all across the region are alarmed for they are speculating a tsunami in coronavirus cases. As the 3rd stage of the COVID, pandemic approaches India whose timely efforts against corona spread were jeopardized due to religious congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat[vii], the requirements of medical care equipment's are increasing with each passing day.

As per another report, India would require around 7,00,000 Personal Protection Equipment PPEs.[viii] The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced the foreseeable shortage of PPEs worldwide and requested all the countries to use the equipment judiciously. Further, WHO has also asked all the countries to boost manufacturing of PPEs by 40 per cent.[ix]

The outcome of the Commerce ministry meeting

The commerce ministry officials agreed that due to coronavirus there would be an economic slowdown. It will take some time to recover and hence intra-regional trade can prove to be an offset. The commerce officials also deliberated on creating a broader framework of trade easing. The ministers emphasised on the need to enhance the notch of intra-SAARC trade given that the pandemic was likely to have a substantial economic setback on the region. Given the global emergency of the Covid-19, India and the SAARC member countries have agreed for seamless cooperation and trust-building to combat and contain coronavirus.

India's Role in SAARC and the World

India is proactively participating in global efforts to combat the coronavirus. Especially, in the wake of its Neighborhood First policy, India has been proactive since the beginning of the year. It took all the essential steps pretty quickly to have a fair assessment of its resources. India has also emerged as the first responder to the emergency faced by its neighbors in the wake of COVID-19. Out of the \$18.8 million Emergency Fund, India has contributed \$10 million, which it is utilizing to send medical supplies to Maldives, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. India has further agreed to lift a partial ban on the export of Hydroxychloroquine (a chemical used in manufacturing of malaria vaccine), to almost 30 countries including SAARC nations as well. [x] The Indian embassy in Afghanistan announced that New Delhi would send 5,00,00 hydroxychloroquine tablets soon. Apart from medicine supply, India delivered 5,022 metric tonnes (M.T.) of wheat to Afghanistan via Chabahar port to ensure food security during difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic. India is also exporting wheat to Lebanon as well. [xi].

Covid-19 pandemic has thrown some serious challenges for the SAARC countries. There is a requirement of standing up to these challenges, concerted and coherent efforts by one and all shall see them pass through the difficult times.

Way Ahead

At this point, India, along with SAARC leaders, should make a comprehensive strategy to combat COVID-19 pandemic based on immediate, short term and long term requirements as discussed below:-

1. **Immediate requirement-** all SAARC nations have access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other medical equipment like testing kits, swab, thermometers, ventilators and face shields for healthcare professionals.
2. **Short term requirement-** India can initiate a partnership with other countries in the region to supply the daily need items. The supply can include 'green channel' comprising of vegetables and fruits, which is appropriately processed. It will not only ensure meeting the demand but also in securing employment and generating income for the farmers.
3. **Long term requirement-** all the nations hit by the COVID-19 can set up a system where they can do e-bidding. Supply of finished product in exchange raw material can be worked out amongst the nations. India can offer assistance to countries like Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka by providing them processed dairy and farm fresh as well as the crops like Wheat, Rice, Legumes.

India exporting the surplus farm produce will not only create goodwill gesture but also help in boosting the income of its farmers. It will reduce their dependency over the Chinese market and does not allow China to capitalize on economic slump due to the pandemic.

Some Probable Measures for India and its Neighbor

- a. **Ease of Trade Policies:** It may need to examine the export- import duties and provide tax incentives for some specific export-oriented products. It can also lift the partial ban on export of agricultural and pharmaceutical products.
- b. **Resume E-Commerce Services** E-commerce and delivery companies can also play a critical logistical role. Due to lockdown, many services are affected, which has also led to a standstill in the employment sector. These services could be utilised to provide

farm-fresh and other necessary daily need items. The e-commerce industry can use the options of contactless delivery to rule out people to people contact. For example the U.S has continued the Amazon delivery services and has further announced hiring of 75,000 more employees to ensure timely delivery.

c. **Ensure Social Safety** the most vulnerable section of the society affected by Covid-19 are farmers, daily wagers and laborer's. Providing them safety nets, in the form of cash or in-kind transfers, should be done in partnership with the health and nutrition experts. Investing in the health and nutrition of vulnerable populations can help lower the mortality rate due to COVID-19. The social safety net is an essential factor to recover in post-pandemic efforts.[xvii]

d. **Reconfiguring Heavyweight Industry** India must share with other SAARC nations the technology on how to convert non-medical manufacturing industries to produce medical supplies like Ventilators, Test Kits, Mask, Protection Gowns, Face Shields. India has asked its PSUs and industry heavyweights like-Tata Motors, Maruti Suzuki, Mahindra and Mahindra, and others to reconfigure their plants to produce ventilators. For example Maruti Suzuki has tied up with AgVa Healthcare to provide them with suppliers to produce the required components and increased production capacity. Similarly, Mylab a Pune based molecular diagnostic company became the first company to have received the validation for its Covid-19 diagnostic test kits.[xiii]

Government of India must take the chance of funding the Indian companies in order to increase their capability to manufacture and at the same time the reliance on FDI is reduced.

Similarly, software companies could work on Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), in order to create some kind of robot-human interaction, reducing doctors exposure to COVID patients.

e. **Make Indigenous Industries Self-Reliant** The initiatives like Make In India, Skill India, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and numerous

start-up companies can be encouraged to become self-reliant. Government of India had initiated many such programs which ensured employment and boost to indigenous manufacturing capabilities. With Covid-19 India has the best possible opportunity to bring these projects back on track and develop skilled labour. It will prepare us in a much better way to face any future health challenges.

The Skill India Project can be utilised to recruit and train nursing staff in order to reduce the gap between the nurse to patient ratio for India is only 1:483, i.e. 2.1 nurses per 1000 population.[xviii]

Conclusion

India is driven by the philosophy of "*Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam*" – which encompasses the entire world as one big family. In the times of global pandemic, India initiated three meetings of SAARC nations bringing all the countries on a common platform and work on common minimum programme to combat this challenge. Taking the initiative forward, India, along with SAARC nations, should flag a "Pandemic Policy" for present and future health-related challenges. Under this policy, India can put its recent decision to uplift partial ban on Hydroxychloroquine, relaxed export-import duties, the exchange of surplus products to the countries in the need, Social Safety net, resuming green channel for farm products and processed food items.

India's initiative has found traction amongst the SAARC member countries, and this has given immense space for India to execute diplomacy and assert itself. Which also means that post-Covid India has provided the neighbouring countries option to move away from China. Making countries less china dependent and function in closed groups .

However, for this, India needs to do a subsequent follow-up on the initiatives taken during the global crisis like Covid-19. A lesson must be drawn from the experience of the COVID-19, and all the SAARC member countries should participate in working out on a plan to prepare itself to fight such future epidemics. The efforts taken in the direction of the health sector must continue,

and the "Emergency Fund" account should become a permanent feature in the SAARC organisation. It is the time when India and SAARC nations need to look beyond the horizon and prepare itself for similar future crises too.

Endnotes

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- a. The article/paper is original in content, unpublished elsewhere and it has not been submitted for publication/web upload elsewhere.
- b. Facts and figures quoted in the article/paper are duly referenced, as needed, and are believed to be correct.

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