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Reintegrating South Asia: Can Disaster Diplomacy Work? ^[1]

The coronavirus pandemic has unleashed a reign of anxiety and helplessness around the world. Already, global financial institutions have predicted catastrophic consequences for the pandemic. The pandemic has been met by a failure of global governance. The impact of the pandemic is sure to restructure international relations across the globe.

In this context, the recent meeting of the heads of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have sent out a positive signal across the region. The region is highly dis-integrated in terms of trade, and SAARC has failed to produce credible results of regional cooperation. So this can be called a welcome move. As South Asia houses 21% of the global population, arresting the spread of the pandemic here is extremely important. Taking initiative, India's Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi held a video conference with the member states to create a dedicated fund to fight the pandemic. India pledged to contribute a sum of \$10 million (USD) to start and has provided necessary masks and sanitizers to neighboring countries.

Other countries like Nepal and Bhutan also dedicated funding toward the cause. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre created a dedicated website to spread information and health awareness and report daily updates related to coronavirus in the member countries.

It is well known that the work of SAARC has been repeatedly stalled by India-Pakistan political disturbances, to the extent that it led to cancellation of the SAARC summit in 2019.

However, given the transnational nature of coronavirus and the demand for immediate collaborative action, the India-Pakistan tension gave way to "disaster diplomacy," which has facilitated a resurgence of relationship-building among the South Asian members.

Studies on disaster diplomacy examine evidence on why disaster-response activities create increased cooperation among countries that otherwise may not engage in constructive cooperation. Though the South Asian region is prone to disaster and has already seen various disasters like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones, this pandemic surpasses all due to its ability to spread in such a short time and the unpreparedness of the countries involved.

Mostly all South Asian countries have undergone partial or total lockdown phases affecting individual, community and most importantly, economy. As South Asia houses most of the world's poor, so closure of economic activity will jeopardize many lives. The World Bank predicts that the pandemic will hit hard the South Asian region and is likely to wipe out the gains that the region made in poverty alleviation and result in increasing inequality. The growth of the region is predicted to be within 1.8 to 2.8 percent in 2020, which was earlier predicted to be around 6.3 percent. Thus the region which is already least integrated will have low capacity to cope in comparison to other regions with high degree of cohesion. Therefore, in order to cope with such a situation, South Asia needs to collaborate. The situation calls for joint efforts, and, thus provides an opportunity for cooperation because there are gains from regionalism. Regionalism should have answers to the disaster by way of collaborative effort.

India, being the most prominent player in the region, needs to take the lead on the joint effort. However, there are certain stumbling blocks that should first be tackled, which may otherwise halt progress—the strongest of which is the economic slowdown India is experiencing now. India, being the largest SAARC member geographically, economically and in terms of population, must be able to bear its own costs of fighting the pandemic at home. Still, the largest contribution in terms of financial and material support is expected from India, which the country has already recognized. Further worsening India's financial situation internally, the country is bearing a burden of struggling economic growth. The number of days of lockdown necessary to stop the spread of the virus halted the economy, especially for the substantial portion of the population engaged in the unorganized and informal sector of the economy. Moody has predicted the growth rate of the Indian economy to be 2.5%, which is worrying for the country and the fate of the SAARC. Given that the world economy is in a state of stagnancy, it might be hard for India to adjust and keep its GDP steep. Consequently, India's funding of SAARC pandemic relief may be in jeopardy.

Another possible barrier to re-integrating South Asia is interference by China. Given the fact that SAARC members have close economic relations with China, and China has huge investments in South Asian countries, it is difficult to stop the influence that China will continue to have on these countries. China's huge investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) of \$46 billion (USD) is an unprecedented investment from China. CPEC is part of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative that seeks to connect China through Pakistan to Eurasia. CPEC will link the significant city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The proposed route will allow the passage of goods and services between China and Pakistan . India has expressed its objection to the project due to the controversial route through the corridor passing through the Gilgit-Baltistan area. As far as Nepal is concerned, it gets 90% of its Foreign Direct Investment from China. China has replaced India as its top trade partner with Bangladesh, which commands 21.53% of its import share. For Nepal and Sri Lanka, China is an important partner in infrastructure and connectivity.

The South Asian region is one of the most disjointed regions of the world in terms of the intra-regional trade. Trade in the region stands at just 5%, which is often credited to the persisting India-Pakistan discord. Hence the process of integrating South Asia has now been dedicated to the forum of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). This is evident from the importance that the forum has gained in recent years. Therefore SAARC will have to deliver to stay relevant, and the functionality of SAARC will decide its future course. COVID-19 due to its cross-border nature calls for significant cooperation on an emergency basis, and therefore SAARC can play a prominent role.

The pandemic presents an opportunity for the South Asian region. Opportunity lies in utilizing the situation to come together through disaster diplomacy. Once the nations come together, they can upgrade the institutional mechanism within SAARC, which can work well beyond the crisis phase and in a different dimension, whether it be economics, political, health or education. Thus, disaster diplomacy can give way to greater possibility of cooperation within the region.
