

The quandary of SAARC in the backdrop of COVID-19

Amna Nisar*

With the spike of Covid-19 cases in March 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the summit of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to formulate a joint strategy to address “disease surveillance data in real time” to curb the spread of pandemic. The call for the summit was warmly received by all the member states.

The Summit was held virtually on March 15, 2020 keeping into consideration the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In the summit, all countries were represented by their heads of the governments except Pakistan. Pakistan deputed Dr. Zafar Mirza, de-facto health Minister for this meeting.

In the Summit Modi proposed for the setting up of an Emergency Fund to fight the outbreak of an evolving pandemic without borders and demands urgent intervention in a responsible manner. He offered \$10 million to get the fund started as the number of infections were rising on a

daily basis. The setting up of an Emergency Fund was a welcoming initiative and has raised the hopes for the revival of an ineffectual regional organization. Modi’s quick action and outreach to build an emergency Fund was although welcoming but one need to be quite realistic while considering the feasibility of the initiative as good intention is not enough to revive a dying institution.¹ Pakistan agreed to contribute US 3 million.

The idea of regional cooperation was first originated in 1980 among the countries of South Asia. In the backdrop of this idea, the first meeting was held in Colombo in April 1981 among the foreign secretaries of the seven founding nations including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Later on in 1983, a foreign ministers meeting in New Delhi identified five broad areas of cooperation including rural development, meteorology, health and population,

* Amna Nisar is Assistant Research Officer at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.



agriculture and telecommunications. At the same time the founding countries also adopted the Declaration on SAARC and formally launched an Integrated Program of Action. The areas of mutual cooperation were further extended into more areas including postal services, cooperation in science and technology, art and culture, and sports and transport. In 2005, at the 13th summit of SAARC, Afghanistan became the eighth member of the organization.

Currently, SAARC has eight countries while United States, China, Japan, Iran, European Union and Republic of Korea are granted observer status. The purpose of the organization was to promote welfare and integration among South Asian countries. SAARC seeks to reinforce collective self-reliance and mutual assistance in various areas of cooperation while collaborating with regional and international organizations.

Despite the remarkable growth of some member countries like India, Bangladesh and Bhutan, the regional efforts could not impact the poverty elimination globally. In spite of many challenges, SAARC has managed to set up a number of institutions to address the collective problems of its member states.

Among those, noteworthy institutions are; the SAARC Development Fund (Thimphu), SAARC Energy Centre (Pakistan), the South Asian University (New Delhi), and SAARC TB and HIV/ AIDS Centre (Nepal).²

Due to inter-member differences, SAARC has only been able to organize 18 summits in its nearly 35 years of existence. The long legacy of distrust among its key members has played dormant in the failure of the organization to achieve its set objectives. SAARC has largely remained an underperforming organization in regional conflicts in all regional conflicts.

SAARC has experienced greater turbulence since 2014, SAARC has experienced turbulence due to political shift of power in India. In the first term, RSS's regime lead by Prime Minister Modi tried to play a diplomatic masterstroke while inviting all the heads of South Asian countries to his inaugural ceremony. This raised the chances of rebirth of a dormant SAARC organization. However, the scope of SAARC was shadowed by the Modi government's hyperactive slogans like "Neighborhood First" and "Act East."³

The efficacy of SAARC finds no place in Modi's regime which actively lobbied with other countries like Afghanistan,



Bangladesh and Bhutan to cancel the 2016 summit which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan.

It is sad that the strategy of Modi's regime to isolate Pakistan in the region has a direct bearing on the functioning of SAARC. In 2014, Modi mentioned on the occasion of 18th summit held in Nepal that cooperation in South Asia would progress "through SAARC or outside of it, among all of us or some of us". This was a clear indication of his intention of moving ahead outside of SAARC with his 'SAARC minus Pakistan' scheme.

Through small scale initiatives of regional integration in South Asia such as the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal initiative), Modi's hidden intentions stand exposed. India is investing resources in the creation of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) that also undermines the credibility of SAARC. In the second term of BJP in 2019, Modi called the heads of the states of BIMSTEC to his swearing-in ceremony that further added to the narrative of sub-regional agenda of Modi and his administration. There can be no doubt that India's resource capacity and asymmetry in size allows it to play a larger

role in shaping the outcomes of SAARC but the nationalist regime seems least interested in SAARC.

Pakistan acknowledges the significance of SAARC in regional integration. It has tried to follow an approach to make SAARC functional and to limit the dominance of India. The larger neighbor's intransigence has virtually place a hold to any worthwhile activity within the organization which remains hostage to the animosity between the two large neighbors.

The outcome of the virtual Summit held last year also has met the same outcome like other important initiatives. Pakistan had showed its doubts regarding the management of Emergency Fund by India. Arguing that the fund needs to be managed and operated in a rational manner. Even after a considerable apse of time, it is still unclear how the regional countries would manage the fund to deal with Covid-19 pandemic in the region. As per the official charter of SAARC, no proposal can be considered without the approval of all member states.

Pakistan and India continue to remain at loggerheads and SAARC continues to remain largely dysfunctional.



Furthermore, no concerted policy has been evolved and developed at the regional level to deal with the pandemic.

The current standoff between Pakistan and India is least favorable in bridging the distrust which has continued

at the root of the SAARC organization. While the Covid-19 pandemic really offered an opportunity to make a fresh restart, but the continued policies of the Modi's regime has ensured that the future progression of SAARC remains stunted.

Notes and References

- ¹ Naveed Siddiqui, "Dr Zafar Mirza at SAARC Conference proposes 'regional mechanism' to cope with coronavirus," 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541128>.
- ² NTI, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)," 2011, <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/south-asian-association-regional-cooperation-saarc/>.
- ³ Robert Bosch Stiftung, "What does India think?," 2015, https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/publications/pdf_import/What_does_India_think.pdf.