

COVID- 19: A Wake-up Call for South Asia

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States have been in a competition and rivalries against each other to gain more and more power. The process has become more sophisticated with the development of digital technology, with the concept of security getting expanded from traditional to non-traditional security matters. With the situation of a Black Swan^[1]- the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been knocked over without a single bullet fired. Black Swan events such as the pandemic “will not appear very often in the evidence, but the failure to find them in a small sample does not mean they occur as infrequently”. A non-traditional security issue has challenged the security apparatus of the world and will continue further. When observing the world responses to battle the pandemic, there seems to be another trend where the global shift of power from west to east has been apparent. South Asia has managed to flatten the curve better than the most powerful states in the West. Even though the pandemic originated in China, the USA has become the epicenter of the pandemic and United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and France have entered the list of more than 20,000 deaths.^[2]

South Asia is comprised of developing countries with a population of 1.9 billion and accounted for 3753 deaths. (as at 14 May 2020). There seems to have triple constraints when curtailing a pandemic, which consist of economic impact, political impact and the social impact. The west has tried to balance all these constraints while ensuring the freedom for all human beings. In contrast, South Asians have always been known on the emphasis of right to life. In states like Sri Lanka, the priority in contingency plans have always been the human factor, the significance of survival with zero tolerance for deaths, with strict measures of lockdown strategies including closure of educational institutes, parks, movie theatres, strict social distancing, travel bans and finally halting all passenger arrivals. Most importantly, military involvement was visible in many countries. Their role has never been limited to traditional security apparatus, but more indispensable in non-traditional security apparatus that has posed direct threats to national

security. This has helped many South Asian countries to flatten the curve and battle the pandemic, however with drastic impact on economy.

Multilateralism in the age of De-Globalization

When South Asia has been able to set examples to the rest of the world, specifically Nepal with zero deaths, the pandemic has reminded us of our South Asian identity. However, there seem to invoke many questions. Are we in an era where states try to strengthen multilateralism? Or are we in an era where states prefer stepping out? Most of us have kept trust on multilateralism to come into play with a solution, whenever a global crisis takes place. However, the US as the norm maker shifted the paradigm to a de-globalized world, withdrawing from Trans- pacific Partnership (TPP), Iran nuclear deal and most recently openly declaring to halt funding to the World Health Organization (WHO). This has made some forgotten the significance of multilateralism. In contrast, Modi has set an example of strengthening multilateralism despite living in the age of de-globalization via South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which was followed by Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) with the rest of the countries lending hands in the course of fighting against COVID-19. According to the Article 1 of the SAARC Charter, objectives of the association are “to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia to improve their quality of life, to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another’s problems, to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields”[\[3\]](#). A pandemic had to remind us the foundation, upon which the states pledged to integrate regionally when states used to value globalized trends. It is necessary to have a mind to strengthen regionalization and if this becomes successful, South Asians can teach a lesson to the world, on the importance of multilateralism and create a shift back to a globalized world. On the other hand, The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi- Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) on which South Asians believes to play a more proactive role and more efficient and successful than other existing regional organization, remains silent. Even though BIMSTEC has expanded its scope towards public health, the organization hasn’t been able to collaborate towards a regional plan of action to contain the spread of the pandemic, at least via dialogue.

The revival of perceptions is necessary for the revival of the regional organizations. It is time to view regional organizations as a window of opportunity rather than another economic entanglement and burden. Organizations like SAARC was hibernating since 2014 and it was cooped up, confined and was in a lockdown long before the world has decided to go to a lockdown as the last resort. Was this due to influence of developed countries like US and UK trying to detach from multilateralism? However, there is a current platform to initiate dialogue on the issue of pandemic. SAARC went on to establish an Emergency fund of 15 million. Keeping numbers aside, the states have taken some effort at this point, which should be applauded.

Many Opportunities or Challenges?

Multilateralism is never a tranquil journey specially in a de-globalized world, when the West sets norms on shifting away with a focus on the domestic situation. The pandemic has further pushed us to a de-globalized world with closed borders and protectionist measures and made us realize our potential, innovation and significance of rich natural resources, which has gone unrecognized due to dependence on other countries to fulfill our needs. The region is home to hectares of arable land and agricultural products, in which the demand has augmented each day. When lockdowns posed direct barriers to industry and services sectors, the agricultural sector seemed less affected. When the states began closing borders, self-sufficiency was the last resort. This has created an opportunity to invest more on local market, while incentivizing agricultural products to cater all local needs and more for the purpose of exportation. Alarmingly, the increase of demand in agricultural products would lead the communities towards increased need of water and water sharing. This highlights a need to reuse water and effectively manage available resources, reassess the existing legal arrangements of water treaties such as Indus and Ganges which could be monitored via regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC in order not to create water wars.

World Bank described South Asia as the fastest growing regions in the world but unfortunately dropped its performance far below the potential^[4]. The Economist has identified the emerging financial markets considering public and foreign debt, cost of borrowing and reserve cover and many stands in peril. Sri Lanka ranks 61 out of 66 countries and Bangladesh ranks 9, India ranks

18 and Pakistan 43^[5]. Economic agreements such as SAFTA was established to “to promote and enhance mutual trade and economic cooperation among Contracting States”^[6] and BIMSTEC is in the rounds of negotiation to establish an FTA with special emphasis on economic measures such as Para tariff barriers and sensitive lists. Unfortunately, the economic integration in the region has only accounted to 5% of GDP. Even though there have been states like India with neighbourhood first strategy, has not been able to be the fraternal role to its immediate neighbours. This is one of the major reasons which led to the creation of vacuum and extra-regional states like China were given an opportunity fill the vacuum in South Asia with financial assistance, especially investments and loans in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal etc. Adding to this, the west has remained as major trading partners, despite Free Trade agreements. Nonfunctioning of global supply chains have created economic shrinkages in the developing countries even more, directly affecting industry and services.

Moreover, poverty alleviation has come to the forefront of the developing countries, posing a question on death of hunger vs death of pandemic, due to long lockdowns in effect. No one should be given a choice between life and livelihoods, as both are basic human needs. As many south Asians were primarily focusing on survival, the social impact in the triple constraint, governments have worked on giving stimulus packages and Modi announced nearly 266 USD almost equal to Pakistan’s GDP.^[7] There is an urge to create an economic model with solid short term and long-term goals, keeping in mind to incorporate strategies to overcome from debt trap. Pandemic had made us aware of the financial capabilities and had hit us hard to realize the necessity of investments than loans.

It takes time to gradually commence general routine and this will lead to unemployment and non-payments of salary would lead to relative deprivation, which could lay the foundation for more radicalization and extremism in South Asia. It has been proved that financial support by terrorist organizations is a motivation for people to become easily radicalized. Global Terrorism Index has considered “intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non- state actor” as terrorism and Afghanistan ranks 1, Pakistan 5, India 7, Bangladesh 31, Nepal 34, Sri Lanka 55, Bhutan 137 and this should be given more serious attention.^[8] The recent Kabul attacks in Gurudwara and in maternity hospital have proven the world, how inhuman the terrorists could

be. Authority should monitor radical and extremist related activities, in the same manner how the asymptomatic patients are being traced and monitored.

In 2017, the highest health expenditure per GDP in South Asia was recorded from Afghanistan with 11.78% and 9.03% in Maldives, 5.55% in Nepal, 3.81% in Sri Lanka, 3.53% in India, 3.19% in Bhutan, 2.9% in Pakistan and 2.27% in Bangladesh[9]. India with a population of 1.3 billion which is more than 6 times larger than the population of rest of the South Asian neighbors. Yet, India's allocation for health is only higher than Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. When observing the Health Index, Sri Lanka ranks 73, the best in South Asia. India ranks 135, Bhutan 136, Bangladesh 142, Maldives 143, Nepal 145, Pakistan 146 and Afghanistan.[10] This draws our attention to the need of reforming the existing health systems and reprioritizing resource allocations. Sri Lanka has a good history traditional Ayurvedic medicine and some other countries like India and Bhutan. If these sectors are reformed and incentivized by governments, ayurvedic medicine could create a good avenue of income. In long term this could be amplified to medical diplomacy, which could be an attraction for many tourists from the west. It is time that South Asians reconsider a new economic model that could promote priority areas such as medical diplomacy and strengthen and secure the economy.

Technological advancement remains another domain to explore to South Asians. The pandemic made us cease physical interactions not only with other states, but also with our own state, village and even neighbourhood. The platform was enabled virtually thanks to digital systems and the need to invest on digital governance was felt than ever before. States like Singapore has already in the process since the time of launching a digital government to bring citizens, businesses and public officers to a single platform in order to raise digital capabilities to pursue innovation, integrate services around citizen and business needs, strengthen integration between policy, operations and technology, operate reliable, resilient and secure systems and co-create with citizens and business by facilitating adoption of technology.[11] States like India, Nepal have paid attention to digital frameworks and possess the finances, skill and innovation to mass produce digital equipment that become indispensable. India and Nepal can lead less integrated South Asia to a virtually integrated South Asia.

Conclusion

As South Asians have decided to cooperate via dialogue, there's a possibility to gradually regain trust amongst each other. However, it will not be easy to strengthen multilateralism in a de-globalized world, if more states join the trend of the US and the UK. Yet, pandemic has given us an opportunity to re-asses relations of each state and act promptly and sufficiently when necessary. It is important to note that earlier South Asians were both less integrated and less self-sufficient. Thus, this pandemic is a wakeup call for us to be more self-sufficient and be better integrated or remain the same, yet with better relations with states at an individual level. South Asia has passed the COVID 19 test of humanity with flying colours but, we are yet to explore the possibilities of a quantum jump in economy. New strategies will be in need for South Asia to set an example to successful regional organization and some areas of attention could be agriculture, technology and medical diplomacy. If successful, these would make us once again the fastest growing region in the world in the long term. It is better late than never.

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