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COVID-19 and India's Response at the Global Level

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COVID-19 has spread in different parts of the world alternating its social, political, and economic dimensions. While it is difficult to ascertain which country has emerged as a global leader during COVID-19, India has certainly earned adulation from other countries and international organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for its efficient and timely management and active efforts at the regional and global levels to combat the pandemic.

With the advent of the crisis, India pioneered the evacuation efforts from major COVID-19 impacted countries such as China, Japan, Italy, and Iran. India has assisted in the evacuation of around 28,000 foreigners from 43 nations till mid-April.¹ This includes citizens of Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, USA, Madagascar, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Peru. These evacuees and other foreigners stuck in India were safely repatriated back to their country. The Indian Armed Forces have always

played a proactive role in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) working towards bringing normalcy in disaster-affected areas. They have again proved to be an indispensable part of the response team during COVID-19. A special flight of Indian Air Force carried medical supplies to Maldives and China. Six naval ships have been kept ready for assistance to countries in the neighbourhood. Also, an Army Medical Corps team was sent to the Maldives to help them in capacity building to fight the coronavirus.²

India's medical diplomacy during COVID-19 has brought it at center stage to meet the global need for Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) which is traditional anti-malaria medicine. Indian medicines have been in great demand even prior pandemic as it accounts for about 10% of the world's pharmaceutical production by volume.³ India was already supplying HCQ and Paracetamol for free to the South Asian neighbours and countries like Seychelles, Mauritius to aid them in their fight against the

coronavirus pandemic. However, with increased demand for these essential drugs from the other quarters of the world and on the humanitarian ground, the Indian government decided to partially lift the ban imposed on them. It has approved the export of 500 million tablets of Paracetamol to 60 countries and 285 million HCQ tablets to 40 countries like the United States, Russia, Spain, Brazil, Bahrain, Germany, and the United Kingdom.⁴

Also, India joined the World Health Organisation's (WHO) "Solidarity trials" established to search for drugs for treating COVID 19.⁵ As the world's largest supplier of generic drugs, India controls around 18% of the global market. Thus, the Indian plan of medical assistance throughout COVID 19 has further strengthened its record of leadership in global health.

Following the extended neighbourhood doctrine of India, emergency medical supplies and personnel were carried to Kuwait, Bahrain, and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) grouping. Besides, New Delhi took immediate steps to coordinate efforts at multilateral levels which include a virtual summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries and G-20 countries.

The most remarkable effort on part of India has been to revive the SAARC cooperation. The spread of the coronavirus in South Asia was

dreaded since its start as many SAARC countries have borders with the most affected countries in the world. Due to geographical proximity, movement between these countries is high. Also, the countries in South Asia are densely populated with the majority comprising poor households. Thus, coronavirus infiltration in South Asia could have been catastrophic.

India recognised this vulnerable position of South Asia and stepped up to unite the region to fight against the virus. It commenced with a video conference on March 15 by Indian leadership with the leaders of the seven SAARC member states and Pakistan being represented by its health minister. During the conference, several initiatives were announced to be laid out by the Indian government such as India proposed a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Emergency Fund with an initial offer of \$10 million from India to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The services of the Indian Rapid Response Team of doctors and specialists were made available to all the members and access was given to India's Integrated Disease Surveillance Portal to strengthen the individual countries in their fight against COVID-19.⁶ Indian external ministry and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) rolled out a training programme for healthcare professionals from SAARC countries.

These initiatives aimed to re-activate the regional forum of SAARC which has been inactive since the Uri Attack in India on September 18,

2016. This was the first high-level SAARC meeting since 2014 as India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan pulled out from the 2016 SAARC Summit in Islamabad.⁷ Against this background, SAARC preparedness plans are in great contrast with the active international organisations of the world such as the European Union, G20, and ASEAN. These regional groups have failed to come up with an efficient coordinated response to contain the spread of COVID-19.

In addition to that, India initiated a video conference by the trade officials on April 8 to discuss the impact of travel restrictions in the region and adopt other means to carry out intra-regional trade. Reports and data suggest that there will be an unprecedented impact of the pandemic on the national economies and the global economy. The recently released 'South Asia Economic Focus' by the World Bank on April 12 has predicted a sharp economic slump in each of the eight countries of South Asia due to a break in economic activity. The report stated that regional growth will fall from 6.3 to a range between 1.8 and 2.8 percent in 2020 which will be the region's worst performance in the last 40 years.⁸ In this light, the SAARC conference on intra-regional trade is essential to reduce the damage inflicted by the lockdown and Covid19 on the region. It will also help to sail through the economic crisis post-COVID-19.

These measures are a welcome change and all the nations except Pakistan have shown their willingness to cooperate in the initiatives.

Pakistan's lack of involvement in these programs has raised questions over the revival of SAARC but it is evident that India is willing to look beyond narrow interests for greater integration of region during the crisis. India's approach to tackle COVID-19 has helped in developing a collective response against the shared threat. It remains to be seen how the global order will unfold after the COVID 19 subsides. Nonetheless India, as a major power in the world, will continue to confront the unforeseen challenges imposed by the coronavirus pandemic.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

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