

## PREPARING FOR SAARC 2.0

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SAARC and India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a video conference with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders on chalking out a plan to combat the COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus, in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: [PTI](#)

A tweet by [Prime Minister Narendra Modi resulted in the first-ever virtual summit of SAARC leaders on March 15](#). Their deliberations reflected a recognition of the serious menace posed by COVID-19 and the need for robust regional cooperation to overcome it. What has happened to this innovative exercise in health diplomacy since then?

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Those who hastened to dismiss the video conference as a mere show may have been disappointed. Considering that SAARC has been dormant for several years due to regional tensions, it is worth stressing that the [fight against COVID-19 has been taken up in right earnest](#) through a series of tangible measures. First, all the eight member-states were represented at the video conference — all at the level of head of state or government, except Pakistan. The Secretary General of SAARC participated. They readily agreed to work together to contain the virus, and shared their experiences and perspectives. Second, [India's proposal to launch a COVID-19 Emergency Fund](#) was given positive reception. Within days, all the countries, except Pakistan, contributed to it voluntarily, bringing the total contributions to \$18.8 million. Although it is a modest amount, the spirit of readily expressed solidarity behind it matters. Third, the fund has already been operationalised. It is controlled neither by India nor by the Secretariat. It is learnt that each contributing member-state is responsible for approval and disbursement of funds in response to requests received from others. Fourth, in the domain of implementation, India is in the lead, with its initial contribution of \$10 million. It has received requests for medical equipment, medicines and other supplies from Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Many requests have already been accepted and action has been taken, whereas others are under implementation. Fifth, a follow-up video-conference of senior health officials was arranged on March 26. The agenda included issues ranging from specific protocols dealing with screening at entry points and contact tracing to online training capsules for emergency response teams. Steps are now under way to nurture technical cooperation through a shared electronic platform as also to arrange exchange of all useful information among health professionals through more informal means.

Those who argue that SAARC members have committed rather limited resources for a grave threat have a point. But they need to study the latest figures which reveal an interesting picture. So far, South Asia has not exactly borne the brunt of the pandemic. Of the total confirmed cases in the world that stood at 12,89,380 on April 6 (according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resources Center), SAARC countries reported only 8,292 cases, representing 0.64%. Whether the low share is due to limited testing, a peculiarity of the strain of the virus, people's unique immunity, South Asia's climate, decisive measures by governments, or just good fortune is difficult to say. But it is evident that India's imaginative diplomacy has leveraged the crisis to create a new mechanism for workable cooperation. It will become stronger if the crisis deepens and if member-states see advantages in working together. Seven of the eight members already do.

To conclude that SAARC is now returning to an active phase on a broad front may, however, be premature. In the backdrop of political capital invested by New Delhi in strengthening BIMSTEC

and the urgings it received recently from Nepal and Sri Lanka to resuscitate SAARC, I recently posed a question to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at a public forum. He said that India had no preference for a specific platform, but it was fully committed to the cause of regional cooperation and connectivity. The challenge facing the region is how to relate to a country which claims to favour regional cooperation, while working against it. Clearly, India has little difficulty in cooperating with like-minded neighbours, as it showed by forging unity in the war against COVID-19. This is diplomatic resilience and leadership at its best.

Finally, a thought for consideration of 'SAARC purists' who maintain that all proposals for cooperation should be routed through the Secretariat and activities should be piloted by the incumbent chair. Given what Pakistan has done to harm India's interests since the terrorist attack on the Uri Army base in 2016 and its continuing resistance to cooperation against COVID-19, the purists' scenario is unrealistic. Both New Delhi and its friendly neighbours need to start preparing themselves for SAARC 2.0.

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