

Corona diplomacy

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"Coronavirus crisis could have lasting impact on global political economy, trigger new equations among nations."

It would have been surprising if China had not come up at all in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's discussion with the neighbouring South Asian leaders over the weekend on a possible joint effort to deal with the coronavirus crisis. After all, China has been the epicentre of the crisis that unfolded since last December. It also looms larger than ever before on the international relations of the Subcontinent.

It was no surprise at all that the Pakistani representative, Dr Zafar Mirza, chose to connect the discussion on South Asian regional cooperation on the coronavirus crisis to China. Mirza was sitting in for Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was the only leader from the region who could not join the conversation. While the comments of Mirza, the special adviser on health to the Pakistan PM, on the lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir, drew widespread attention, his brief reference to China did not.

Mirza rightly pointed to the importance of South Asia learning from China's experience in containing the spread of the virus. He went a step further to remind his colleagues that China is an observer to the SAARC grouping. There are many observers in the SAARC, including the US, European Union, Japan, South Korea and Iran, all of whom are struggling in their own ways to deal with the global diffusion of the coronavirus crisis. But it is China alone that figured in Mirza's remarks.

There is no question that Pakistan's deepening strategic partnership has defined Islamabad's response to the coronavirus crisis. While most countries of the Subcontinent scrambled to evacuate their student population trapped in Wuhan, Pakistan seemed unwilling. Islamabad was more than deferential to Beijing's sensitivities against countries evacuating their citizens and students from China.

As Beijing criticised other countries for trying to "isolate China", Islamabad stood like a rock in solidarity with Beijing. One other country that demonstrated a similar level of solidarity was Cambodia, whose president flew into Beijing at the height of the crisis to stand with the Chinese leadership. Most observers of China would designate Pakistan and Cambodia as Beijing's only "allies" in the developing world.

While Beijing values the public demonstration of solidarity, it has far bigger challenges at hand. After being on the political defensive through much of January and February as the crisis exploded in Wuhan and Hubei province, it has now gone on the offensive. Once it got control over the epidemic at home, Beijing has turned to changing the narrative on the crisis.

Three themes dominate Beijing's effort. The first relates to domestic politics and is about presenting the "Leader" Xi Jinping as the "hero" in the now "successful people's war" against the virus. As the death toll from coronavirus rose rapidly during the last two months (it now stands above 3,200) there was widespread international speculation about the political consequences of the crisis for Xi's leadership of the Communist Party of China. But Xi appears to have weathered the storm (at least for now) by silencing the critics and cracking down harder on the dissidents.

The second theme in China's effort is to counter the perception that the virus originated in that country. Beijing is objecting strongly to calling it "China Virus" or "Wuhan Virus". It has dismissed the criticisms of the CCP's initial failures in responding to the crisis and has now revelled in attacking the Western inability to learn from the Chinese experience. Chinese spokesmen have also fanned conspiracy theories about the US army bringing the virus to Wuhan.

The third element of Chinese strategy has been to claim global leadership in containing the spread of coronavirus. By sending medical aid to Iran and Italy — two countries most affected by the crisis — and others, Beijing is arguing that it is part of the solution to the global crisis rather than its cause. China's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York has written to all member states assuring them of its commitment to counter the global healthcare crisis and address the massive problems of economic dislocation triggered by it.

China's global diplomatic offensive has inevitably fed into US domestic politics and the contestation between the Republicans and Democrats in an election year. While the Republicans are blaming Beijing for triggering the crisis, the Democrats are attacking President Donald Trump for failing to develop an effective response.

Major disasters cutting across national borders often compel the victims to rethink the contested relationships with their adversaries, next door or in distant lands. Earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, for example, have often created diplomatic openings for nations to come together. The coronavirus crisis, however, has done little so far to lower the unfolding tensions between the world's two leading powers— the US and China.

Experts studying the so-called "disaster diplomacy" suggest that diplomatic openings triggered by calamities tend to be short-lived. Amidst the demonstration of mankind's smallness in the face of nature's fury, leaders tend to think big about resolving differences with each other. But the promise, studies say, to privilege the collective good above the narrow framing of national interest, dissipates quickly.

As the impact of the calamity wears off, so does the positive thinking. Old suspicions take hold of security establishments again. Sooner than later, the default negative positions reassert themselves. We have seen this happen repeatedly in political responses to the multiple disasters that have fallen upon the subcontinent in recent decades.

Might India's current diplomatic efforts at cooperation with Pakistan and rejuvenating regionalism lead to the same old dead-end? Pessimists would argue that the quest for cooperation with Pakistan is a fool's errand. Optimists would suggest change is inevitable and that Delhi must continue to find a way to rewrite the political script between India and Pakistan.

Realists would want to enter a caveat. Unlike many natural disasters, which are mostly one-shot events, the coronavirus crisis could have deep and lasting impact on the global political economy and inevitably trigger new equations among nations. Is India ready to seize the new possibilities for reconstituting the South Asian region? Delhi has certainly taken an important first step forward in renewing the multilateral conversation with the neighbours. It must now follow through with actions to facilitate productive outcomes for the Subcontinent as a whole.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements:

1. Recently there was a meeting of SAARC countries on the crisis of Corona virus, in which China has not participated.
2. The outbreak of Corona virus has also not improved the relation of China and America.
3. The SAARC meeting on Corona was concluded through a video conferencing.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 1 and 3
(c) 2 and 3 (d) All of the above

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 16 March., is 1 (b)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

How is Prime Minister Modi's initiative to create a United South Asian Platform to fight the spread of the corona virus is important for India? Comment.

(250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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