

# Will Modi's COVID-19 fund initiative revive SAARC?

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**"Only robust political will and cooperation, not conflict, can lead to development in the region."**

On Sunday, while addressing the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed the creation of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) Emergency Fund for SAARC. Mr. Modi's sudden proposal came as a surprise to many, as the Indian government has maintained for many years now that SAARC has not been successful in containing the regional threat of terrorism. The last SAARC summit was held in Kathmandu in 2014. The 19th SAARC summit, scheduled to be held in Islamabad, was cancelled after the September 18, 2016 attack on the military base in Uri. Since then, India, the largest SAARC country, has held that the grouping has inherent problems and has instead highlighted the role of newer outfits like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as an alternative to SAARC to deliver on connectivity, development, and counter-terrorism efforts. In a conversation moderated by Kallol Bhattacharjee, Major General (Retired) Abdur Rashid and Qamar Agha discuss the relevance of SAARC today. Edited excerpts:

**Do you think Mr. Modi's initiative will help SAARC?**

**Major General Abdur Rashid:** There are certainly many commonalities [among these nations] regarding threats and perceptions of threats. Such initiatives will always be welcome. This initiative [Mr. Modi calling for a SAARC meeting] came as a bolt from the blue since everyone thought SAARC is now in the coffin. But once the meeting was initiated by Mr. Modi, it was welcomed. The people of Bangladesh have also shown a positive attitude. Besides, there is concern about the problem in all these countries. We can talk and keep moving ahead. This will reduce tension and create robust cooperation.

**Qamar Agha:** I fully support the Major General's argument. The region is integrated culturally and historically. There have been migrations for centuries within the region and we have always been cooperating with one another. It was after British rule that the visa passport regime was introduced. After SAARC, we thought cooperation would develop. It was, in fact, developing. We have common problems: not just COVID-19 but other enormous problems including water sharing and poverty. If we come together, that will once again lead to cooperation.

**An initiative such as the creation of a health fund was not tried earlier, though the SAARC Charter hints at such cooperation. Given the absence of a collaborative spirit between India and Pakistan, is there a spirit in SAARC to prevent such front-line threats?**

**Major General Abdur Rashid:** The concerns of every nation should be addressed in SAARC. Leaving Pakistan aside, you can see how other organisations like BIMSTEC are growing because every nation is on board there. Regarding

SAARC, we have to see that all nations are on board and see if we can create a common platform. This fund is a good proposal. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accepted the proposal happily.

**There have been concerns about the relevance of SAARC, especially after the Islamabad summit could not be held. Do you think India-Pakistan problems could once again create trouble for the grouping's revival?**

**Qamar Agha:** Pakistan should realise that the future of the region lies in cooperation with India. Not just India, the Afghan government is also having a very bitter experience in dealing with Pakistan as they say militants are coming from Pakistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan is a very important country and that is why we insist that Pakistan should come on board.

**But over the last few years we have been repeatedly told by leading Indian policymakers and officials, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, that there are inherent problems in SAARC. So, is India's effort sincere?**

**Major General Abdur Rashid:** Security is of great concern in the region and the India-Pakistan security situation certainly affected SAARC. But India-Bangladesh cooperation has become a great example of security management. We in Bangladesh have also been quite concerned about Pakistan's attitude towards terrorism as they have an internal force which always promotes terrorism. So automatically we have to take into consideration every nation's concern [in SAARC] on this. I am sure if we can build a robust political will, SAARC may go higher. If we live with suspicion and lack of trust, then development will be reversed. I think Pakistan has also learnt that conflict and tension cannot take the country ahead. At the moment, Bangladesh has gone ahead with development plans and it has shown that ties with India can go ahead.

**In view of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent statement which indicated that the country is not prepared to deal with the crisis, it's natural to ask if Pakistan will show political will for a SAARC collaboration and, consequently, for its revival.**

**Qamar Agha:** I think they are gradually coming around. The problem is so big that no country can handle this alone. Pakistan borders Iran and it's a common problem for the whole region. The problem in Pakistan is that the elected government traditionally has tried to establish good ties with India. But all the leaders — whether Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif — have faced major setbacks. The Pakistani military establishment is still reluctant to deal with us but circumstances are forcing Pakistan to at least cooperate on this issue. Second, they are also facing a very serious economic crisis in the country. Earlier they used to get money from oil-rich countries but oil prices have fallen and these countries also have troubles such as the war in Yemen. Pakistan is totally dependent on China but this too cannot go on for long as China-U.S. ties are also evolving. So, a situation like the 1990s, when cooperation was possible, is once again a possibility. Later normalisation of relations may also be possible.

**There are other problems that are emerging among SAARC member countries like the proposal for a country-wide National Register of Citizens in India. This has triggered concern in Bangladesh. There's also the Madhesi issue with Nepal and the border dispute in Kalapani. Can the revival plan of SAARC overcome these challenges?**

**Major General Abdur Rashid:** India is a big neighbour, so automatically all the smaller countries that surround it will have some concerns about it. So, cooperation from India to look after the concerns of its smaller neighbours is very important.

From Bangladesh's point of view, we have solved the land boundary agreement (LBA) and exchanged the enclaves. We conducted it very peacefully without dislocating a large number of people. In comparison, 1947 was a humanitarian disaster as far as dislocation of lives was concerned. We have established that we can solve bilateral problems

with India. All SAARC countries must have the political will on how to address such differences with India. Bangladesh maintains that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act is an internal matter of India's. Bangladesh will respond when it creates an impact on us.

The most important thing is that government-to-government cooperation is not enough. The more long-lasting thing is people-to-people ties. In this, India and Bangladesh are far ahead than India and Pakistan. It is not just with India but also with Myanmar.

Ms. Hasina has emphasised a peaceful solution to the Rohingya issue. If India can emulate these ideals and mentality to support smaller neighbours, we can build a peaceful South Asian region.

**Do you think issues like NRC and CAA can create hurdles for SAARC?**

**Qamar Agha:** CAA is a difficult issue because there is some internal opposition too. Barring Pakistan, other SAARC states have accepted that it is India's internal affair. But the security issue will remain important as far as Pakistan is concerned. But as far as other mechanisms are concerned, with other neighbours of India, they are working. We have organisations like BIMSTEC and bilateral engagements to deal with these differences. Almost with all the countries of the region, India has managed relation so far, except with Pakistan. Pakistan cannot achieve its objectives with the help of militancy. The economic situation is bad in Pakistan and foreign investment is not pouring in as there is a possibility that Pakistan could be placed on the blacklist in the Financial Action Task Force. I am hopeful that the SAARC summit will take place in Islamabad or in an alternative location.

**When an organisation is not used for some time, it loses its strength. This is also true for SAARC. What can be done now to help boost SAARC?**

**Major General Abdur Rashid:** SAARC lacked momentum for some time. After SAARC, we had started BBIN [Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal], BIMSTEC, BCIM [Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor]. Leaving aside Pakistan, the security concern of India will not be resolved. This time an opportunity has been given to Pakistan, as pointed out by Mr Agha. Bangladesh is equally concerned about Pakistan's patronisation of terror elements. Jaish-e-Mohammed supports outfits in Bangladesh too, and we have lot of examples on that front. Therefore, we need to build trust and Pakistan will have to give the first commitment that it will not support these unethical forces. As discussed here, Pakistan has a unique civil-military problem. But Bangladesh has shown the way as it exercises political control over its military and focuses on development and that is why we are in a better position. Neighbours will have problems but we have to solve these issues amicably. The LBA and maritime boundary agreements have also shown the way for SAARC. Social and cultural contacts should be fostered to help people-to-people contact within SAARC.

**What can India do to boost SAARC at this juncture beyond the COVID-19 crisis?**

**Qamar Agha:** Individual countries cannot develop because we are in the age of globalisation. Fostering economic integration and development, supporting social and educational development and integration are some of the important things that India can do. India has been developing connectivity with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand. So similarly we sought to have connectivity with Pakistan but that did not happen. Now we are trying to build that in Chabahar. These are some of the things that need to be boosted further in SAARC.

**Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)**

**Q. Recently India has taken an initiative to set up Corona Virus (COVID-19) Emergency Fund for SAARC countries. Consider the following statements in this context:**

1. India has contributed US \$ 2 billion to this fund.
2. This initiative will improve relations between India and SAARC countries.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) Only 1                      (b) Only 2  
(c) Both 1 and 2            (d) None of these

**Note:** Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 19 March., is 1 (d)

**Expected Questions (Mains Exams)**

**To what extent Prime Minister Modi's attempt to make SAARC a collective platform to fight COVID-19 recently could be helpful in reviving SAARC?**

**(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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