

Covid-19 nudges India to pursue regional cooperation through both SAARC and BIMSTEC

Covid-19 has proved to be an opportunity for reviving SAARC, but it remains to be seen if this prospect becomes a reality. The government has been cautious in describing such expectations as “premature”.

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) signalled a change in India’s rejection of SAARC as a platform for regional cooperation by inviting all heads of state and government of SAARC countries to a video summit to promote a region-wide response to the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). The video summit was attended by all SAARC leaders, except for Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) of Pakistan, who deputed his special assistant for health to represent him. SAARC has been in a virtual deep freeze since India conveyed it would not attend the 19th SAARC summit, to be hosted by Pakistan in 2017, in the wake of the cross-border terrorist incidents at Pathankot and Uri. Other

SAARC leaders also declined to attend. The summit was indefinitely postponed. Since then India has downgraded SAARC as an instrument of its “Neighbourhood First” policy and shifted the focus to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) instead.

BIMSTEC includes all SAARC countries except Afghanistan and Pakistan and two [ASEAN](#) countries, Myanmar and Thailand. For his swearing-in ceremony in 2014, PM Modi had invited leaders of all SAARC countries including Pakistan. For the swearing-in ceremony in 2019, it is BIMSTEC leaders who were the invited guests. Soon after taking over as external affairs minister, S Jaishankar referred to SAARC having “certain problems” while BIMSTEC was described as having both energy and possibility and “a mindset which fits in with that very optimistic vision of economic cooperation that we want.” Against this backdrop, Modi’s initiative in convening a SAARC video summit, instead of a BIMSTEC video summit, conveys a deliberate political message.

At the conference, Modi gave a call for the countries of SAARC “coming together and not going apart.” A SAARC Covid-19 Fund has been proposed with India committing US\$10 million. Modi referred to the role which could be played by an existing SAARC institution, the Disaster Management Centre, in enabling a coordinated response to Covid-19. Suggestions were made by several leaders, including the Pakistani representative, for a SAARC Health Ministers’ Conference to follow up on the summit. This is likely to be convened soon.

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Modi’s initiative has put Pakistan on the defensive. So far, it was India which was seen as undermining SAARC in which other South Asian countries have a keen interest. While there has been readiness on their part to participate in BIMSTEC, they do not consider the latter as an alternative to SAARC. In taking this initiative, Modi may be responding to these sentiments. If Pakistan now drags its feet, then the onus will be on her for weakening the Association. There is a new situation as a result of the abrogation of [Article 370](#) relating to Kashmir, which has been denounced by Pakistan. It would be difficult for the latter to accept cooperation with India under SAARC because this would compromise its stand on Kashmir. This dilemma was obvious in the

remarks which the Pakistani representative made on Kashmir during the video summit, which were rightly ignored by Modi.

It is also a fact that the focus on BIMSTEC has not yielded the results India may have expected. Current trade among its members is US\$40 billion, though the potential was set at \$250 billion. India's Act East policy, which involved a key role for India's Northeast, has stalled. The Northeast is in political turmoil while India has opted out of the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#), which would have added substance to BIMSTEC.

Today it is difficult to see BIMSTEC as a credible and preferred alternative to SAARC. In any case, it makes better sense for India to pursue regional economic cooperation both through SAARC as well as BIMSTEC rather than project them as competing entities. If the argument is that regional cooperation involving Pakistan is a non-starter due to its ingrained hostility towards India, then being part of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where both are members, becomes a somewhat contradictory position.

In determining its position towards SAARC, India must also take into account the significant inroads that [China](#) has been making in its sub-continental neighbourhood. With the exception of Bhutan, every South Asian country has signed on to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A number of Chinese infrastructure projects are already in place or are being planned in each of our neighbours. With SAARC becoming inoperative and BIMSTEC not living up to its promise, China is likely to become a key economic partner for South Asia and India's hitherto pre-eminent role will be further eroded. On this count, too, it is advisable for India to advance regional cooperation both under SAARC as well as BIMSTEC. Both are necessary.

Despite the frustration in dealing with Pakistan, India should not give up on its western neighbour. Relations with Islamabad will remain adversarial for the foreseeable future but still need to be managed with two ends in mind. One, to ensure that tensions do not escalate into open hostilities and, two, to reduce leverage which third countries may exercise over both countries on the pretext of reducing tensions between them. This does not in any way compromise our firm stand against cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Revival of SAARC could be an added constraint on Pakistan's recourse to terrorism as an instrument of state policy.

Finally, revival of SAARC would also support the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul in navigating through a difficult and complex peace process involving a Pakistan-sponsored Taliban.

While these are essentially tactical considerations, there is a compelling reality which we ignore at our peril. Whether it is a health crisis like the Covid-19 or climate change, the melting of Himalayan glaciers or rising sea levels, all such challenges are better and more efficiently dealt with through regional cooperation. The Indian Subcontinent is an ecologically integrated entity and only regionally structured and collaborative responses can work.

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