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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Leveraging on the Pandemic: Can Modi Succeed?

By Parama Sinha Palit

SYNOPSIS

India is capitalising on the COVID-19 pandemic to exert leadership in South Asia to deflect negative perception of its populist and protectionist policies in domestic politics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is striving hard to apply his tech savviness in social media and videoconferencing to score diplomatic advantages, but India's trust deficit with its regional neighbours is a major obstacle.

COMMENTARY

HISTORY SHOWS that regional cooperation can strengthen after the camaraderie of and lessons learned from overcoming a major crisis affecting different countries at the same time. Such cooperation in the Asia Pacific deepened with crises like the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the SARS epidemic of 2003. The outbreak of COVID-19 appears to have encouraged regional and multilateral cooperation too.

While countries have closed borders to stall the spread of COVID-19 and have shut down internally as well, there are noticeable transboundary efforts to fight the pandemic together. These include Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiatives for recharging the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to contain the crisis.

Struggling to Contain COVID-19

Well before South Asia began experiencing rapid escalation in infected cases, India sensed the opportunity of utilising the pandemic for fostering greater regional collaboration. Modi, in keeping with his social media savvy image, reached out to his regional counterparts to fight the disease together.

In March 2020, Modi tweeted an offer: “I would like to propose that the leadership of SAARC nations chalk out a strong strategy to fight coronavirus,” and added, “we could discuss, via video conferencing, ways to keep our citizens healthy. Together, we can set an example to the world, and contribute to a healthier planet.”

Soon after, Modi convened a videoconference with participation from all SAARC states – including Pakistan. While all the heads of the SAARC countries were present, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan stayed away with his country represented by its Special Advisor on Health Affairs.

Although the proposal by Modi was hailed by the US-based *Foreign Policy* magazine as an attempt to position ‘India as a leader in crafting global responses to the coronavirus even while attempting to combat it at home’, the deep distrust that existed amongst India’s neighbours was discernible.

Failure to Bolster Solidarity

While COVID-19 did push the governments of all South Asian countries to make concerted efforts to coordinate a response to fight the virus through the SAARC platform, it failed to bolster solidarity. Nepal, an old ally and a friend, for example, even accused India of spreading the virus in the country. Modi, in the meantime, has continued to push his leadership role in the region.

He proposed the creation of a regional Emergency Fund for tackling and mitigating the disease in South Asia, and pledged US\$10 million to its corpus, apart from calling for the formation of a rapid response team of medical personnel.

India has also sent medical teams to Maldives and Nepal, and arranged medical supplies, ranging from testing kits to ventilators and medicines, to the neighbouring countries. These Indian initiatives, to help its neighbours contain the virus, are intended to project India as a responsible regional power.

Despite the challenges that accompany regional cooperation, the Indian leadership has displayed a fair amount of pragmatism on this issue. Modi not only embraced the SAARC, but also appeared at the meeting of the NAM leaders. The NAM meet was his first since becoming Prime Minister. Both the SAARC and the NAM are platforms he had earlier distanced himself from; SAARC seemingly because of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India, and NAM presumably because of its Cold War legacy.

Aiming at greater cooperation, Modi has deployed social media extensively to connect with the regional community at a time when physical distancing has become a global norm in every country to fight the pandemic. A virtual NAM meeting on the crisis, also arranged early May 2020, not only witnessed Modi emphasising collaboration for fighting the pandemic, but also highlighted growing concerns regarding the proliferation of fake news.

This was perhaps his attempt to refute reports from Pakistan-based agencies relating to rising Islamophobia in India, undermining India's position globally, and therefore targeted at international audiences for bolstering its global image.

Nagging Problems, India-China Rivalry

While the India-led efforts at fostering a new phase of constructive regionalism is creditable, South Asia's limited success in creating a cohesive regional architecture, casts doubt on the prospects of the new endeavour. The region's ability to work together on a common agenda continues to be held hostage by the overwhelming trust deficit between India and Pakistan, China's role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean combined with the acute strategic rivalry between the two in expanding their respective influence in the Asia-Pacific.

Modi, in the meantime, has also attempted to project himself beyond the region, keen on being seen as a collaborative global player, crafting global responses to this unprecedented global public health crisis. In March 2020, he, once again, broached the possibility of replicating the SAARC videoconference to the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the current G-20 chair, this time with the G-20 leadership, which took place on 26 March 2020.

India's intention of creating more strategic space and leverage for itself at regional and global forums is obvious. The pursuit of this goal, though, encounters perception problems that are largely domestic. COVID-19 highlighted communal tensions, including heightened Islamophobia gripping the country, which required Indian diplomats to reach out to Gulf countries to assuage their sentiments.

The perception of rising majoritarianism and aggressive nationalistic tendencies at home also impact India's efforts to don the mantle of a responsible regional power, let alone a global player. It has been a challenge for India to decouple damaging inward-looking tendencies from the inclusive leadership role it wishes to play in regional and global affairs.

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