

How COVID-19 health diplomacy could help countries in South Asia reengage with SAARC

*As the coronavirus spreads across South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held its first virtual summit to begin coordinating the region's response to the crisis. Here **Andre Sanches Siqueira Campos (KU Leuven, Belgium)** explains how diplomacy in public health across the region could provide a mechanism for countries in South Asia to reengage with the structures and mission of the regional organisation.*

On March 14, Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi tweeted, "I would like to propose that the leadership of SAARC nations chalk out a strong strategy to fight the coronavirus. 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". Member states of SAARC responded promptly to the tweet and the first Virtual Summit of Leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was held on March 15, a significant exercise for health diplomacy in the region, which also draws attention to the growing role of "twiplomacy".

Considering SAARC's inactivity in recent years at high-level meetings, after the tensions between India and Pakistan increased in 2016 due to the terrorist attack on Uri by a group based in Pakistan, New Delhi's foreign policy seems to be committed to reviving regional engagement around SAARC. With the exception of Pakistan, who sent a Special Assistant, all governments were represented at the head of state or at a government level, together with the institution's Secretary-General and Sri Lankan diplomat, Esala Weerakoon, to share experiences and discuss scenarios and prospects for collective action.

COVID-19 emergency measures: from rhetoric to action

India mobilised the countries presented at the meeting to launch a COVID-19 Emergency Fund, bringing the total financial contributions to a modest US\$18 million, whose system is operationalised with the approval of a consensus among members that contributed, but has India as its main donor and manager. From a narrative perspective analysis, SAARC leaders are willing to engage in regional cooperation in order to manage the coronavirus outbreak, a pandemic that does not respect borders. From a financial point of view, perhaps, the \$10 million deposited into the fund by India (Bangladesh contributed US\$1.5 million; Nepal US\$1 million; Afghanistan US\$1 million; Sri Lanka US\$5 million; the Maldives US\$200 thousand, and Bhutan US\$100 thousand), compared to the size of its economy and, until now, the low mobilisation of its large pharmaceutical industry in favor of the regional cause, signals of its limited capacity (if it is not intentionally) to exercise regional leadership.

Pakistan has declared recently a contribution of US\$3 million to the COVID-19 Emergency Fund. However, Pakistan reinforces that all member contributions should be attached to the institutional procedures of SAARC, managed by the Secretariat of the Institution, located in Kathmandu, but which has not yet established the general regulations for the use of the fund. India, on the other hand, defends the use of the resources as an "autonomous emergency stage", remaining outside of the calendar of activities approved by SAARC (New Delhi fears that Pakistan may use the institutional mechanism to constraint initiatives proposed by the country), which created divergences between these two countries once again.

On the other hand, however, the most relevant legacy of this regional reengagement, concerns the power of political articulation at the institutional level to deal with the coronavirus outbreak and its human and economic consequences. In this sense, SAARC aims to centralise the acquisition of hospital supplies, medical equipment and medicines to be divided between Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. On March 26, a videoconference meeting was held between high-level health authorities regarding specific protocols that address national border screenings and people tracking, online training for emergency response teams, measures to foster technical cooperation through a shared electronic platform and a permanent exchange of information between health professionals, through the implementation of the Information Exchange Platform (IPE). Actions that could be leveraged from the regional experience of Telemedicine network project implemented in Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan.

Although, at first glance, the amount raised by SAARC in South Asia is small due to the relatively low number of COVID-19 cases in the region (at present), it is one of the most populous and least developed regions in the world, presenting greater vulnerability to the spread of the coronavirus. In this way, India seeks to make regional cooperation in SAARC viable through the creation of this institutional mechanism that is associated with the national control measures of the member states and which may deepen, according to the evolution of the pandemic in the region. Joint meetings and dialogue between SAARC members and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are still not ruled out.

In this regard, India also plans to organise meetings with SAARC trade and industry ministers in order to discuss measures to minimise the economic impact of the coming crisis. New Delhi also intends to review trade negotiations with SAARC, as many countries face shortages of medical supplies and difficulties in exporting products to the international market, due to the blocking measures of importing countries. However, many countries produce the same export products, being international competitors instead of constituting a complementary value chain, making it difficult to review negotiations or stimulate intra-SAARC trade.

The China factor is another obstacle to India's political pretensions in the region, as Beijing is an important trading partner for South Asian countries (contributing to economic and commercial dynamism in the region) and supplier of hospital equipment, it might lead to a role of Indian regional leadership in the shadow of the presence of China. Connectivity problems in South Asia remain a major obstacle to regional trade development, keeping the SAARC Preferred Trade Agreement (SAPTA) and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) stagnant.

Looking ahead

Although it would be misleading to presume that SAARC would be resuming its active phase, as India has been working on strengthening BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and consolidating the concept of the Indo-Pacific throughout its extended neighbouring region, regional efforts could lead SAARC back to the regional game again. However, many challenges will come and regional reengagement will not take place in a short time. The consequences of a potential worsening of COVID-19 seem, however, (although with great difficulty) to possibly help Pakistan and India appease current regional tensions. But only after a return of some kind of normality, we will be able to see if the pandemic was an exogenous factor capable of overcoming (for an instant) historical conflicts that mark South Asia's international relations.

Therefore, thinking about a deep reengagement of SAARC is still far from reality. Nonetheless, regional commitment efforts against COVID-19 in South Asia set an improving example of a regional response case, initiatives and know-how, which could lead SAARC to an institutional renewal in the next years, depends on how India and Pakistan are able to keep their differences apart in order to overcome a greater issue.

Even though the results of this regional behaviour could also configure a new regional format, based on SAARC -1 (Pakistan) or even SAARC +1 (China), considering that some countries are involved to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. No doubt world politics will change after COVID-19, but only after the epidemic has passed will we be able to check whether SAARC's attempt to demonstrate to the world that a regional coordination of policies in response to coronavirus outbreak can be successful in South Asia.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured photo: Covid-19 test; Credit: [Fernandozhiminaicela](#), [Pixabay](#).