

Back to SAARC: On Modi's video conference with leaders

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to convene a video conference of leaders of the eight-member SAARC on Sunday represents a much-needed "out-of-the-box" thinking as the world faces the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Pandemics do not recognise political borders, and in times of trouble, reaching out to neighbouring countries is the most obvious course of action.

To that end, the hour-long discussion with the leaders of Afghanistan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Special Assistant on Health to the Pakistan PM, came up with shared and unique perspectives in dealing with the virus that has affected 1,75,250 people and claimed over 6,700 lives worldwide.

Key Highlights of the VC

- The meeting saw Mr. Modi's proposal for a COVID-19 emergency fund — India will contribute \$10-million — as well as a decision on technical task forces.
- Afghanistan and Pakistan have specific challenges as they share long borders with Iran, which has emerged, after China and Italy, as a major hub of the virus. Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka worry about the impact on tourism, which is a mainstay of their economies.
- Another concern is of an escalation in the virus's spread in the subcontinent. With close to 300 positive cases, South Asia has seen a much lower incidence globally, but given its much higher population density, it is clear that any outbreak will lead to far more casualties.
- Other concerns are about under-reporting, as fewer people are being tested in much of South Asia, and whether public health services can cope. It remains to be seen how closely the SAARC countries will cooperate to deal with the virus.

The virtual summit is the first high-level SAARC meet since 2014, and comes after India's pulling out of the 2016 summit following the Uri attack; it was to have been hosted in Islamabad. Pakistan too has made its concerns over Jammu and Kashmir a sticking point in re-engagement, and PM Imran Khan's absence and his nominee's attempt to raise the issue of restrictions in Kashmir indicate that this attitude persists.

Clearly, reviving the SAARC initiative, which countries in the region including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have advised, will not be easy, given poor ties between SAARC's two largest members, India and Pakistan. But it is significant that New Delhi seems to be willing to try to put politics aside when dealing with the pandemic that confronts all.

SOURCE: *The Hindu*