



Boosting Cooperation in South Asia

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Why in News

Recently, the Prime Minister **suggested that neighbouring countries should consider creating a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses**, so that they could travel quickly within the region during health emergencies, on the request of the receiving country.

- This suggestion was made during a workshop on **‘Covid19 Management: Experience, Good Practices and Way Forward’** hosted by India with **nine neighbouring nations, including Pakistan**.
- The eight members of the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** and **Mauritius and Seychelles** participated in the workshop.
- **SAARC** comprises the following **member States**: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Key Points

- **Measures Proposed by India in the Workshop:**
 - Creating a **special visa scheme** for doctors and nurses.
 - The **civil aviation ministries** should coordinate on a **regional air ambulance agreement** for medical contingencies.
 - Creating a **regional platform** for collating, compiling and studying data about the **effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines** among populations.
 - A **regional network** for promoting technology assisted epidemiology **for preventing future pandemics**.
 - **Sharing of successful public health policies** and schemes.
From India, **Ayushman Bharat** and **Jan Arogya schemes** may be useful case-studies for the region.

- **Other Highlights:**

- Barring Pakistan, which hasn't requested vaccines from India, the other participating **countries thanked India for supplies of vaccines**, medicines and equipment amid the pandemic.
- **South Asia was among the first regions** to come together in recognising the threat (Covid-19) and committing to fight it together.

The countries in the region created a **Covid-19 emergency response fund** and shared resources, equipment and knowledge.

- The region shares many **common challenges** – climate change, natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy, and social and gender imbalances, and also **share the power of centuries-old cultural and people-to-people linkages**.

- **Significance:**

The participation of all the SAARC members including Pakistan has opened **an opportunity to resolve the issues among its members** and restart the regional development cooperation initiatives such as South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

- **SAARC Issues:**

- **Lack of Unanimity:**

Consensus building continues to be a challenge on major decisions. For e.g. During the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in 2014, the signing of the **SAARC motor vehicle agreement (MVA)** had to be stalled as Pakistan declined to it.

- **Tussle Between Countries:**

- Most of the smaller states and external players believe that the **India-Pakistan conflict** has undermined SAARC.
- Pakistan's use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy has made normal business impossible. Therefore, India pulled out of the summit that was to be held in Pakistan in 2016 in the aftermath of the Uri terror attack.
- **Dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Durand line**, is also a reason for tussle within SAARC.

- **Domination by India:**

India's economic position vis-a vis other SAARC countries, has often been the subject of criticism that India acts as a big brother rather than a strategic partner.

- **Marginalisation by Other Organisations:**

SAARC has become almost marginal to the regions' collective consciousness and other organisations such as the **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)** came into the forefront.

Way Forward

- India should enhance cooperation like recently, it contributed USD 10 million to SAARC Covid-19 Emergency Fund and **supplied vaccines** for countries in the SAARC region (Eg. **Operation Sanjeevani** for Maldives).
- SAARC revival by promoting **confidence building measures (CDM)** among its members will facilitate India's **neighbourhood first policy** in meeting the challenge of regional strategic encroachment by China through its **Belt and Road Initiative**.

Source:TH