

### Fighting COVID-19 as region - India's Health Diplomacy in South Asia

Kishor, Nanda; Balasubramanian, Poornima

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kishor, N., & Balasubramanian, P. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 as region - India's Health Diplomacy in South Asia. *IndraStra Global*, 1-4. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-76275-7>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

# Fighting COVID-19 as region-India's Health Diplomacy in South Asia

IG [indrastra.com/2020/03/Fighting-COVID-19-India-Health-Diplomcy-South-Asia-006-03-2020-0039.html](https://indrastra.com/2020/03/Fighting-COVID-19-India-Health-Diplomcy-South-Asia-006-03-2020-0039.html)

March 20, 2020

*By Dr. Nanda Kishor and Poornima Balasubramanian  
Department of Geopolitics & International Relations  
Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India*



"It is in times of crisis that good leaders emerge"  
- Rudolph W. Giuliani

South Asia is witnessing an unprecedented response to the recent worldwide crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. India's shared border with China was expected to be threatened by this pandemic much more than what has is being witnessed today. Surprisingly, Europe seems to be suffering much more than the South Asian countries. The general discourse in geopolitics regarding China's presence in the region called '*encirclement strategy*' seems to have made a lesser impact on the countries in South Asia though there seems to be the considerable presence of Chinese nationals in the region. The economic dependency or interdependency China has had so far has not made an impact in containing the pandemic in South Asia except for the unverified claims

by Pakistan. As Giuliani stated, India has emerged as a leader which has taken the responsibility to lead the South Asian region from the front using India's capacity and capability in the medical field and public health.



*Image Attribute: On March 15, 2020, Prime Minister Modi led a video conference of SAARC leaders. Member nations start work on a regional strategy to tackle coronavirus/COVID-19. | Source: A screengrab taken from PIB's Official Youtube Channel*

Last Sunday Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened a virtual meeting of the SAARC leaders to discuss status and management options for the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting was attended by the leaders of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Special Assistant on Health to the Pakistani Prime Minister. The move was indeed welcomed by India's neighbors at a time when the on-going health crisis needs to be fought together by the neighborhood as one. Though, skepticism was gauged from the Pakistani side as it involved the Kashmiri issue as well as a plea to include China in the regional initiative. During the video conference, Prime Minister Modi pledged \$10 million as a part of the COVID emergency relief fund open for contribution from other members and also proposed to set up technical task forces to execute the standard operating procedures. He also offered medical assistance by doctors and specialists who are prepared with test-kits to be deployed on request by the neighboring states. Arranging online training sessions for the emergency response teams of the countries was also part of his proposal. **"We can respond best by coming together, not growing apart- collaboration, not confusion, preparation not panic"**, the Indian leader said.

The striking aspect of this initiative is to walk the talk component being envisioned in India's *Panchamrit* strategy in foreign policy. The *Panchamrit* is elaborated as *Samman*

(*dignity*), Samvad (dialogue), Suraksha (security), Samriddhi (shared prosperity) and Sanskriti Evam Sabhayata (cultural and civilizational links). Just going by the present initiative of India, the South Asian neighbors are treated with dignity though they may neither the capacity nor the required resources to contain the pandemic. The virtual meeting was also used as a platform for a dignified dialogue for the health security of the region which can ensure shared prosperity to maintain cultural and civilizational links India shares with its neighbors. Though India has not been in talking terms and has taken exceptions to Pakistan's behavior, it has risen above day to day politics at times of crises to act as a region. This is also incommensurate with Modi's *Neighbourhood First Policy* where he has prioritized the region beyond any of the other nations where there are greater economic stakes of India. India, unlike the United States, has not indulged in any blame game. In the twenty-first century, the people of the developing world expect much more resilience from their respective leaders rather than trying to pass the buck and always look up to great powers for help. On the other hand, it is the developed world that should have taken the lead to assure the developing world and less developed ones of the health security they can provide with their advancement in science and technology. Self-help is the greatest help in politics and life, and this seems to have influenced leaders like Narendra Modi. Sometimes, a new idea is required in politics though there might be mammoth examples available in the archives to just follow what has been done before. The responses from leaders in the SAARC nations except Pakistan perhaps reiterates India's growing stature and its open embrace of challenges and ready to take responsibility attitude in the region. As a mark of acceptance of Modi's leadership and idea, the Saudi Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Salman** said he would bring together the leaders from the Group of 20 major economies (G20) to address the global crisis.

In a complex interdependent world, where not just the capital but also the virus is transnational, there are greater stakes the nations need to monitor including public health for economic progress worldwide. It is in economic progress the world decides whether a nation is successful or is a failure, great power or an insignificant power. Unlike in the past, today's nation-states have to look beyond what's within their borders to monitor their progress. This holds good, especially for health security. From being only a regional outbreak, these virulent parasites can sporadically spread to become a pandemic unless there are inter-state cooperation and collaboration to restrict such a phenomenon. These health issues are potent enough to translate into socio-politico-economic issues that might slow down the entire world. A World Health Organisation (WHO) study revealed that there is a close relationship between health diplomacy and national security. **Health diplomacy efforts** towards a region are said to reduce, to an appreciable level, political violence, and instability in its neighborhood. More so, every passing year of the **21st century** has been a recipient of more investments in global health initiatives than the previous years. It has become an essential aspect of the diplomacy itinerary of progressing states.

Health diplomacy is a crucial part of public diplomacy. In fact, a successfully implemented health diplomacy initiative could raise the chances of the overall public diplomacy agenda of a state. With the mushrooming of new modus operandi in the technological domain,

charting such plans of action has been practicable and power-enabling. The scope of public diplomacy has widened to not just involving the state machinery but also non-state agencies that partner with the state or derive support and recognition from the state. Yet many times, the states, spearheaded by the leaders, propel these initiatives of multilateral cooperation to foster stronger partnership and to build confidence, trust, and transparency to collaborate against eliminating a common threat that can engulf the security of the society.

Public diplomacy also plays a dedicated role in influencing perceptions about the state and mobilizing opinions in its favor. South Asia being a region that has always been a subject of study of *perception and misperception* in international relations, this is perhaps the moment India has well utilized for a common good which will go a long way. The acceptance of Modi's leadership in times of crisis where India could rescue its citizens from severely affected countries like China and Iran with meticulous planning executed by an able Minister for External Affairs would remain as an example for several nations. This is for sure an India moment in the South Asian region created by well executed and well thought of initiative that can serve as an example for the coming crucial months in different parts of the world.

#### **About the Authors:**

**Dr. Nanda Kishor** (ORCID: [0000-0002-2024-100X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2024-100X)) teaches Geopolitics and International Relations at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India.

**Ms. Poornima Balasubramanian** (ORCID: [0000-0001-6051-5813](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6051-5813)) is a Post Graduate Research Scholar in the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India.

***IndraStra Global*** is now available on

***DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this insight piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the IndraStra Global.***

---