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Leadership in the Times of Pandemic: India's Resurrection in Asia and Implications for China

Preety Sahu*

ABSTRARC

As the Coronavirus pandemic is sweeping through Asia, regional powers India and China are contesting for hegemonic influence and leadership. This contest has been intensified as both India and China have engaged in aid diplomacy, providing both health and economic assistance to different states of South, South-east and West Asia. Furthermore, while the coronavirus outbreak created problems for Chinese soft power initially, the border conflict between India and China created geopolitical tension in the region. Moreover, India invited global manufacturers that were leaving China, banned Chinese products to challenge Chinese economic hegemony in Asia. Aggravated by India's actions, China has intensified its Road and Belt initiatives as well as health and financial aid. However, both states are facing internal economic and political challenges after the lockdown. While India struggles to get its economy back on track, China is struggling with its reduced soft power. Whoever overcomes its shortcomings will overpower the rival and will lead the post-Pandemic Asia.

KEYWORDS: Aid Diplomacy, Soft-power, Leadership, Covid-19, India, China

INTRODUCTION

As the Coronavirus Pandemic sweeps continents, countries are trying to prove their regional prowess by showing leadership abilities. Whether it is Germany in Europe or Canada in the North American continent, national governments are not only focusing on solving the problem within their national boundaries but also helping their neighbours to fight this deadly virus. In Asia and South Asia, India has emerged as the leader who has initiated a common platform among SAARC nations to fight the Pandemic. In March, Narendra Modi engaged with the SAARC leaders to announce a

* Doctoral Student, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

E-mail: preetysahu92@gmail.com

common action plan to boost healthcare systems in the countries through co-operation and co-ordination (The Hindu, 2020). Moreover, India has assisted other Asian countries too. This article aims to discuss India's leadership role in Asia during this Pandemic. This Article argues that at a time of universal crisis, India has both motive and opportunity to yield Asian leadership.

HISTORY OF INDIA'S CRISIS RESPONSE IN ASIA

India has shared friendly relations with its Asian neighbours from ancient times. India's goodwill to other countries can be traced back to 8th century when India was not even a sovereign nation-state. History bears evidence that the princely states of 'Bharat' or 'Hindustan' have helped communities from Persia and Central Asia, provided shelter or asylum to them in times of distress and need. For instance, India has served as home for many Persians who had to flee Iran in the 8th century to survive Mongol attack (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). There are stories that explain how the Indian princes in the Western provinces allowed the Persian community to enter and settle down in India. Furthermore, India has helped Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees and internally displaced people. It also offered exemplified help to Nepal with funds and man power during the great earthquake of 2011 which brought about major distress to the Himalayan country (Biswas, 2018). India also sent assistance to Indonesia and Malaysia during 2004 oceanic Tsunami and earthquake.

Moreover, India has taken stand in the past for neighbours like Sri Lanka, Tibet, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal during their political crisis. In fact, Bangladesh and Nepal's current political scenario and civil movements have a history of Indian involvement. It has played crucial support to Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan in 1971 and Nepal's movement for democratization and abolition of monarchy. Likewise, in Afghanistan, India's peace-building initiatives are remarkable. Apart from diplomatic dialogue, Afghanistan has received developmental aid from India in the form of education aid, health support, technical co-operation and strategic support as well (Sinha, 2017). In Sri Lanka, India's covert military missions helped Sri Lanka to get rid of its biggest insurgent group, the LTTE. Thus, India has not only executed its south-south co-operation, but also played the role of monitor, guide and a friend in need. It has stood by its friends in Asia even on international platforms like the United Nations and International Monetary Fund (IMF). For such reasons, India is considered to have a great amount of influence among not only its SAARC partners but also other Asian counterparts. These qualities to monitor, guide, initiate and execute co-lateral strategies with other countries put India on a leadership position. It also puts India on an advantageous position as it moves forward to lead its Asian friends at the time of crisis.

INDIA'S EMERGING LEADERSHIP IN ASIA

As the Pandemic started to spread fast across Asia, countries adopted inward looking approach to deal with the problem. This is to say that they started fighting the Pandemic within their domestic boundaries. This was the dominant approach adopted by almost all countries at that time, except for India who stood with its South Asian friends at the time of crisis. On March 15, Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi organised a video conference meeting with the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) with the objective of fighting Coronavirus together with the member countries (The Hindu, 2020). He proposed the creation of an inter-country plan to fight Covid-19 by connecting the health experts and policy makers of the member countries via an electronic platform. The Ministry of External Affairs took to the press to inform that the SAARC countries have affirmatively responded to the call of PM Modi and collectively decided to exchange information,

expertise and best practices with each other so that the Pandemic's impact can be minimized (The Hindu, 2020).

Soon afterwards, India launched a regional plan to help the neighbours across land and maritime border. The plan included providing medicines, PPE kits, testing kits and training of medical protocols. India also suggested forming of a Whatsapp or email group where discussions as well as exchange of information can take place (The Hindu, 2020). In the meantime, India is constructing a SAARC platform in the country to discuss matters of regional importance in future. Hence, as the world go digital in the time of pandemic, India too proposed the same for regional partners in Asia. Moreover, India displayed its leadership initiative by announcing \$10 million for SAARC Covid-19 emergency fund (The Hindu, 2020). Following India rest of the countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Bangladesh contributed to the fund which made the total a \$15 million dollar. Thus, India has mobilized its closes neighbours and allies in Asia to act under a common platform at the time of Pandemic.

India's successful leadership has been much appreciated by the international bodies such as the United Nation and the World Health Organization (WHO) for leading at a time where even strong regional organizations like European Union have proved less effective (Mishra, 2020). For instance, when Italy was fighting its worst battle against Coronavirus and was the most affected European nation, it sought the help of EU and other neighbours. EU failed to provide help at a time when Italy needed it the most for which the organization later apologised. However, Germany extended its helping hand to Italy by helping with PPE kits and other health aids (Lowen, 2020). On the other hand, India announced its intention to help the neighbours when South Asia was only at the first phase of this disease. It has been appreciated as a brave move on India's part. Indian policy makers have been able to make the best use of a crisis situation to everyone's advantage in the south. India has already sent aid to thirteen countries including Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Seychelles & Mauritius and Bahrain in West Asia.

The aid includes pharmaceutical items such as Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and paracetamol (Mishra, 2020). Moreover, Pakistan's refusal to participate in the SAARC meeting organised by India via video conferencing, India has promised to help Pakistan during this crisis by providing Paracetamol and HCQ (The Hindu, 2020). Meanwhile, India has dispatched a 14-member medical team from its defence forces. Doctors and paramedics have also been sent to Maldives to assist them. A Rapid Response Team (RRT) for Nepal has also been sent by India to assist the Himalayan neighbour during this crisis (Siddiqui, 2020). Besides, in an exceptional display of leadership, India has evacuated foreign citizens from countries including from Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, US, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, South Africa and Peru amid its own evacuations in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak (Mishra, 2020). This aid diplomacy can be viewed as India's efforts to upgrade its image as a leader in Asia.

CONSEQUENCES FOR CHINA

Another factor that is helping India's cause is the decline of China's image as a leader in Asia. China has already made a hostile impact on the whole world for allegedly hiding the real gravity of the coronavirus situation in the earlier days (Wong, 2020). Moreover, serious allegations put against China by USA and Australia also puts China in a suspicious position. After recovering from the coronavirus, China pushed forward its own aid diplomacy but, in that process, it hurt countries like

Italy, Pakistan and Brazil (Wong, 2020). While China supplied faulty kits and masks to Italy, Pakistan and India, it has cut short its supplies to Brazil, its oldest trade partner. China and Brazil have also engaged in social media fights as their embassies criticised each other for being irresponsible and insensitive (BBC, 2020). China has also accused countries like US and Brazil of racism. The Asian power has also been criticised in the international press for gross violation of human rights within China as it has withheld crucial information from its citizens as well as WHO. Thus, the reliability on China's regional and international policies has diminished.

On other hand, Chinese economy has suffered a blow due to which its production and export has gone down. USA has already expressed its disappointment as China has made delays in delivering essential goods to the USA (New York Times, 2020). Moreover, now some MNCs have shown willingness to shift away from the China and move to other Asian countries as their production hub. Acting on this advantageous situation, Indian government has already offered land in Uttar Pradesh and Goa to two MNCs who have just moved away from China (The Economic Times , 2020). The lands are being offered at cheap prices. According to some reports, India has already proposed 461,589 hectares of land to companies like POSCO and Saudi Aramco (The Economic Times , 2020). The Indian government has also hand-picked sectors such as electrical, pharmaceuticals, engineering, solar equipment, food processing, medical devices, electronics, chemical, automobile and textiles as focus areas for promoting manufacturing (Johar, 2020). The government has also asked the embassies abroad to identify and contact the companies that have announced their exit from the Chinese market and are now looking for new production hubs within the continent. As a result, Indian government's investment agency, Invest India, have received queries and offers from Japanese, American, Korean and Australian companies to relocate to India.

India has also urged its states to take initiative in inviting foreign investment. In this regard, Prime Minister Modi also held a meeting with several states on 30th April to create separate programs for each state so that MNCs from different sectors can be invited according to their capacity and resources (The Economic Times , 2020). In this meeting, Andhra Pradesh conveyed that it is in touch with several companies from Japan, US and South Korea. Andhra Pradesh's special chief secretary Rajat Bhargava also commented that the state's coastline and ready-made industrial parks are advantageous to the nation in inviting foreign direct investment (Johar, 2020). While the southern states are targeting the IT companies from the Silicon Valley, Korea and Singapore, Uttar Pradesh is developing an online system for land allotment to global enterprises for industrial and commercial purposes (Johar, 2020). This shows India's preparedness to take up the leadership role in near future.

Furthermore, India recently modified with FDI rules which has cut down privileges of Chinese investment in India. China has shown outrage at this step; however, India considers it necessary to promote its domestic economy (The Economic Times , 2020). China has been able to open up its economy and production sectors earlier than the rest of the world. It is an advantage that China retains against India. Moreover, Chinese aid diplomacy has been welcomed by some states and therefore US is suspicious about Chinese motives behind the aid diplomacy. Another important factor is that although Indian is offering assistance to some countries of Asia, China is a global power that has the capacity to resume and prevent the medical supplies (The Hindu, 2020). Therefore, few countries wish to criticise China in a delicate time like this. However, India is making moves to both act as a donator and a motivator to its neighbours in the time of need. India certainly have better

reliability than China in both as a reliable country and as a group player. Therefore, scholars are assuming a power vacuum in Asia that needs to be fulfilled by someone like India that promoted itself as a reliable partner.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

However, India's efforts to take up the leadership in Asia is challenged by factors like financial hardship in the post-Pandemic period and China's prolonged influence on regional and global economy. While, China has already opened up its economy after three-month long lockdown, India is still in the phase (The Hindu, 2020). As a result, India's production and export has suffered a blow. Moreover, Moody has already announced that this year India's growth rate will be 0% which may affect its ability to help the neighbours (The Economic Times, 2020). It is most likely that after recovering from this Pandemic, India's closest neighbours Nepal, Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan will look towards India for assistance in their nation-building process (Mishra, 2012). Therefore, India is currently facing this incredible challenge of sustaining its 1.4 billion populations as well as helping its Asian neighbours. Moreover, China still enjoys its strategic superiority with its strong economy, wide market, resuming export and huge deposit of foreign currency. Together, it puts China in a more advantageous position than India. Besides Chinese aid diplomacy and the Belt and Road initiative will keep Asian and Europeans countries attracted towards China for the time being. Therefore, India requires counter-strategies to replace China in Asia.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, it can be stated that India has a unique privilege to become Asian leader. However, it still has a long way to go in achieving that dream. Yet, the pandemic certainly opens up gates of opportunity for India to take away from China its decades-old hegemony. To achieve this goal, India needs to make continuous and innovative efforts to prove its leadership. Moreover, it is important for the Modi government to increase their co-operation and assistance measures beyond South Asia. Especially, to help countries like Pakistan may help in the development of goodwill among the longstanding enmity. Moreover, it can be a step towards neutralising China's influence in Pakistan which has been a constant cause of headache for India for past several decades. Furthermore, although each Asian country may not require India's help in this crisis, but it is certain that a common fight against the Covid-19 is certainly a better approach to win this war. India needs to not only offer material but also moral support to its Asian counterparts so that goodwill can be promoted. Showcasing goodwill in a time of crisis is a great booster of soft powers, history has shown us. Scholars across disciplines have been opinionated about how the Pandemic might change the future world order and they agree that the post-Pandemic geo-economic shift will help India. However, this is not to suggest that India needs to work its way up in the times ahead to replace China's dominance and hegemony in Asia. For this, India needs to display both hard and soft power to other countries by serving them at the time of utmost need. Hence, it is important for India to keep leading the Asian countries on multiple fronts including medical assistance, healthcare, economic support, strategic co-operation and technological exchange. Then, it can become easier for India to replace China and emerge as the new Asian leader in the post-Pandemic times.

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