

WEST & SOUTH ASIA CRISIS WILL BECOME A DIPLOMATIC HORROR FOR ASIAN PUBLIC HEALTH

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The region of west and south Asia is facing cascading risks emerging from natural disasters, extreme weather events, national security challenges, rising regional tensions and public health consequences of COVID-19 and neglected global health diplomacy over the years. Never before has global health received this much attention in world history. However, the spread of COVID-19 in conflict zones in Yemen, issues within Saudi Arabia, US-Iran conflicting priorities, Israel-Iran friction points, Myanmar's internal war, Rohingya migrants, Pakistan's economic collapse and Afghanistan's new normal with Taliban takeover, the burden of stable diplomacy for Asia lies on India's shoulder.

Multi-pronged risks which are a direct outcome of this crisis paints a grave diplomatic and national security concern for all countries in west and south Asia. Goes an old adage, "When your neighbour's house is on fire, your own property is at stake."

The diplomatic bonds being built due to ancient practices, cultures and geopolitics now stands replaced with challenges of modern development in a globalized world. As much as great aspirations remain shared, the region is home to number of infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, emerging and re-emerging infections which have implications on economies that directly affect sustainable development goals. Foreign policy neglecting global health challenges simply cannot stand out in an age still dominated by ideological fanaticism, religious zeal, nuclear aspirations and self-interests of nations instead of shared interests.

The region also does not have strong health infrastructure and human resource to mitigate the cascading risks that emerge with national security issues. While the region at large has demographic dividend, channelizing this dividend seems like a herculean task with regional instability deliberately being created. West and South Asia must learn a simple fact that if Germany and France can come together after a bloody World War that killed millions, Asia's future lies in stability, regional co-operation, shared intelligence, closely networked global health diplomacy, technology transfers and south south co-operation.

Social health for programmatic goals

All nations in West and South Asia must adapt a public health in all policies approach with a focus on social health in terms of programme implementation goals to strengthen communities, plug existential gaps and to mitigate socio-economic consequences of not doing so.

Urgently curtailing rising infectious diseases, re-focusing to eradicate malaria, tuberculosis, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and simultaneously bringing in public theme parks by creating walkways, cycling paths and gardens as a basic smart city concept will contribute in a big way to reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases. Not doing so has direct implications for labour markets, occupational health, disability-adjusted life years and the economy.

While there is every reason for optimism in terms of life expectancy and growth, these hard-won gains must not be lost in futile civil unrest in a quest for power and balance. Benefits nevertheless are also unevenly distributed with many countries and their population left out of the mainstream development agenda and they continue to subsist in poverty and ill-health. Research estimates only serve to suggest that this gulf is widening both across and within countries for which immediate solutions remain necessary.

Solutions for a resilient West & South Asia

Regional neighbours must respond to both to present and future global health risks that are staring

before us and one way of doing so is locally recruiting health attaches for foreign embassies. Cascading risk serves to suggest that a new algorithm is necessary for west and south Asia and the practices of the past no longer serves well for regional stability and sustained progress. Building this resilience will mean less reliability on the west and re-focusing convergent sectors where multi-stakeholder policy reigns supreme in government, among private bodies, non-government establishments and bringing forth social health in all policies across all line ministries. The government must provide strong stewardship to non-government organizations who drive public health programme plans on ground and the corporate sector spending in Corporate Social Responsibility must be galvanized to address risk informed planning at various levels of governance. The region must have faith in the superiority of her children, the intelligence and ability to explore new avenues and build breakthrough pathways and must invest in young progressive minds which will give a clear advantage over other world powers in a quest for internal national resilience.

Investing in preventive public health

All that is needed is common sense to predict an ailing, ageing, and fragile global health system which has sent shivers across every government department in the region. COVID-19 is a trailer compared to what is to come. The time to act is still not too late, although actions need to be accompanied with sincere urgency.

We need to invest in preventive public health which has the sole and singular potential to change the destiny of West and South Asian countries and propel them as a power house for the ages.

My own impression is that West and South Asia must construct a preventive global health diplomatic round-table forum to build risk informed planning, address cascading risks and to meet national security goals in the region which will preserve peace, happiness and tranquillity without harming civilians or without fuelling further friction from here.

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