South Asia's Covid-19 time bomb is ticking

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South Asia is one of the world's most populous and most densely populated geographical regions. It is home to over one fifth of the world's population. It is at the same time deeply mired in poverty, with more than 41 percent of the total number of world's multidimensional poor living here, despite the marginal progress made by it over the decades due to a considerably long period of robust economic growth, averaging over 6.5% per annum for most part of the last decade.

There have been multiple reasons for this economic growth not translating into improvement of socio-economic indicators. Firstly, there has been a deep variation in economic performance of the countries in the region and then there are serious governance and security issues across the region. The regional countries have, therefore, been mostly in Medium Human Development or Low Human Development categories on the human development index.

In the present context, wherein Covid-19 pandemic is raging across the world, countries in South Asia have been woefully underprepared to cope with the disease. The health infrastructure, despite the sharp variation in quality of healthcare across the eight countries in the region, is inadequate everywhere. It is severely undersupplied and underdeveloped, and the gaps are expected to become more pronounced as it deals with the deadly viral infection.

The scale of the pandemic in South Asian countries looks smaller when compared with other parts of the world. There were 15,949 active cases in South Asia as of April 13, 2020 and 460 people had died because of the infection. The number of infected people in South Asia make up just 0.85% of the world figures for Covid-19. Similarly the number of deaths so far in the region are 0.4% of the global death toll. Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal have reported no deaths. The disease is concentrated in India (9152 cases & 308 deaths) and Pakistan (5374 cases & 93 deaths), where the numbers are growing sharply, whereas three other countries Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are at early stages of the epidemic.

This, however, does not reflect the full extent of the crisis and there is no room for complacence. One reason for these figures not being truly reflective of the spread of the disease is that none of these countries have so far started mass testing. The scale of Covid-19 tests in South Asian countries is very low when compared with the rate of testing in some of the countries reporting higher infection rates. Pakistan has the best figures for the region with a ratio of 248 people tested per million of the population followed by India which had tested 129 people per million of its population. Similarly contact tracing has been below par across the region.

The countries seem to be excessively relying on lockdowns and enforcement of other social distancing measures like closure of schools, markets, theaters, and ban on public gatherings. It is, therefore, important to remember what World Health Organization's Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had to say few days back. "Simply following guidelines for personal behaviour (such as social distancing, regular handwashing and coughing into your elbow) are simply not enough to extinguish the pandemic", Mr Tedros said. Emphasizing the need for wider testing, he had said: "Once again, our message is: test, test, test." The argument is that the pandemic cannot be stopped if it is not known that who is infected.

Low testing in South Asian countries has been low because they had very small capacity for conducting large scale testing. The capacity is, however, growing and hopefully the ratio for testing would improve in next few weeks.

It would not be wrong to say that the worst is possibly yet to come for this region. This is because South Asia has multiple vulnerabilities including high population density, poor health indicators/high incidence of diseases like hypertension, diabetes and tuberculosis, and circumstances that make implementation of social distancing measures difficult. These could potentially make South Asia the next global hotspot. Preventing that from happening would require urgent aggressive containment measures by all governments.

In all South Asian countries the first case of Covid-19 came with travelers from abroad. Therefore, their first response was invariably to isolate them and their contacts. It was only in the later part of March that all turned towards addressing the problem of local transmission by imposing varying degrees of lockdowns and other restrictions on movement. Probably it was bit late by then.

The real issue behind the chaotic response in most of the South Asia countries was because the decisions were based on political and economic considerations rather than medical logic. Inevitably everyone ultimately did what was required, but it is the timing that matters the most.

Some of those unavoidable measures, like lockdown, which halted economic activity, would have impact for the economies of the countries. The World Bank has, therefore, rightly projected that South Asia will likely experience the worst economic performance of the last 40 years. It forecasted the regional growth rate to decline by 1.8-2.8% in 2020, down from 6.3% projected six months ago. Economy of Maldives is expected to be hit the hardest because of drying up of tourism, which was the mainstay of its economy. Similarly, the already struggling economies of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, too could take a big hit.

In these murky economic times, it is important to remember that the poor and marginalized sections of the societies would suffer the most. Many of them drew their living from the informal economy and services sector and lacked any social safety nets to fall back upon. These segments of society should, therefore, be central in all decision making and extra effort needs to be put in to protect marginalized and vulnerable groups at higher risk, including daily wage earners, people displaced by conflict, health workers and prisoners. Otherwise, there could be serious socio-economic consequences for all countries in region.

Another important issue that has emerged in the region is the violation of human rights in the response strategies adopted by various governments in the region. For instance Bangladesh and Sri Lanka cracked down on critics of their Covid-19 containment measures, while in Occupied Kashmir, Indian authorities have continued with the communications blockade by blocking high speed internet and in many areas keeping internet shut altogether on security grounds. Sri Lanka by cremating dead bodies of Muslims, who died of novel Coronavirus infection, hurt religious sensitivities of Muslim community. Moreover, Nepal refused right of return to its economic migrants from India by sealing its border.

The governments need to remember that in times of calamities and epidemics, human rights must be at the heart of their responses.

Governments in South Asia must importantly ensure provision of protective kits and masks to the healthcare workers at all tiers on war footings. This has been slow so far. Without healthcare professionals properly equipped with safety gear, it is feared that increasing numbers of medics could contract infection. This would exacerbate the inadequacies of the health system especially the shortage of qualified doctors.

The Geo-Political Angle:

Geopolitically, Covid-19 has thrown the world into a crisis. International order is under unprecedented stress. Public health is at the forefront of policy discourse, while ongoing conflicts have taken a back seat. Deep-rooted rivalries and ongoing conflicts are seeing unexpected developments e.g. Yemen ceasefire, UAE leader calling up Syrian president to offer support against the disease and adversaries like US-Taliban discussing response to pandemic. Such cooperation, however, will be episodic. It will only continue till the pandemic lasts.

On the other hand, great-power competition between China and the U.S. has accelerated. Beijing has directly provided emergency kits and medical supplies to over 100 countries reinforcing and expanding its sphere of influence at the global stage. Washington, meanwhile, continues to blame Beijing for mishandling the coronavirus in the initial weeks. The Covid-19 Pandemic has, undoubtedly, accelerated the geopolitical march of history towards American decline.

But, interestingly South Asia, which has been held back all along by intra-regional rivalries particularly between Pakistan and India, is unlikely to change at least the way the regional politics operates here.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) – the regional grouping, which aims to promote cooperation among the eight member countries – has been in limbo. There has been no formal summit since Nov 2014 because of India's veto on Pakistan hosting the 19th Summit.

The outbreak of deadly Covid-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the regional leaders to come together for protecting not only their people, but also others in the neighbourhood by setting aside political considerations. The convening of the virtual summit on Covid-19 on March 15, 2020 was in this context seen as the region coming together against the common threat. But, once again politics prevailed and it became apparent that Indian action of convening the Covid-19 meeting, much like its Saarc Satellite project and the BIMSTEC gambit, were aimed at sidelining Pakistan from the bloc.

Two major outcomes of the virtual summit were setting up of Saarc Covid-19 Emergency Fund and a video-conference of trade officials to discuss the impact of the pandemic on intra-regional trade. India has kept itself central in these initiatives. Pakistan's reservation on both the initiatives has been that Saarc Secretariat should have been kept in the lead. Despite its reservations, Islamabad pledged $3 million contribution to the Fund with the rider that the Fund should be administered by the Saarc Secretariat and that the modalities for the Fund's utilization should be finalized through consultations with the member states as per the Saarc Charter.

Pakistan, meanwhile, skipped the trade officials meeting with the objection that these events should be coordinated through Saarc secretariat.

As the crisis is evolving, leaders/governments need to strictly follow the medical advice and adopt pragmatic strategies. In essence, they should avoid taking decisions that could in the long run prove too costly. Importantly, a feedback mechanism should be put in place, allowing leaders to make adjustment wherever and whenever necessary. At present, there is lot of uncertainty among the people. Everyone is literally waiting for the next announcement on the television, while situation on the ground is worsening.