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AIC
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

AIC COMMENTARY

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ASEAN-India Cooperation in Handling Corona Pandemic

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Introduction

During the last four months, ASEAN, its member states and dialogue partners have issued statements to jointly fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The national leaders have discussed through video conferences and telephonic conversations the challenges posed by the spread of the virus. The ASEAN Health Ministers issued a joint statement on 7 April 2020 pledging coordinated efforts to combat the virus outbreak within the ASEAN as also work with the dialogue and development partners, respectively¹. ASEAN, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea held the Special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on Coronavirus Disease through video conference on 14 April 2020.²

Indian Prime Minister participated in the Extraordinary Virtual G-20 Leaders' Summit convened on 26 March 2020 to discuss 'challenges posed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and to forge a global coordinated response'. On 15 March 2020, Indian Prime Minister also interacted with the leaders of SAARC countries through a video conference. Indian Prime Minister also discussed with the leaders of Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam through telephonic conversations and shared concerns over the pandemic with assurances to extend support to ASEAN member states. Likewise, Indian Foreign Secretary has had weekly tele-conversations with counterparts from US, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam to share ideas and best practices in the Indo-Pacific region for responding to COVID-19 pandemic.

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Mitigating the Effects of Pandemic

India and some ASEAN member states have allowed flight operations to facilitate repatriation of stranded students, tourists, businessmen, seamen and others back to their country of origin. National carriers, special cargo flights and chartered flights between New Delhi and Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia conducted operations for evacuation of the respective nationals. Although some countries have cancelled existing visas for travel, these are purely precautionary in nature, and restrictions could be lifted after favourable and safe conditions for travel are announced by respective countries.

There is ample evidence that both India and ASEAN are in the midst of fighting a highly infectious disease that transcends regional boundaries and across the globe. Both partners have conveyed their intention to fight the pandemic at various fora; however, there has been no joint statement or special announcement by India and ASEAN to address COVID-19 pandemic. There are at least six important reasons that necessitate a virtual ASEAN-India Special Summit or a Joint Statement given that both partners are going through extraordinary circumstances and are confronted with unprecedented health and safety challenges at home. As of 15 May 2020, there were 41,921 active cases of COVID-19 in the 10 ASEAN member countries, and India was battling with 53,946 active cases.³

First is about the World Health Organisation's International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) guidelines which India and ASEAN member states have implemented. In India, the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) is the national focal point for IHR commitments and the ASEAN has acknowledged and announced its plans to "consider formulating an ASEAN standard operating procedure (SOP) for public health emergencies."⁴ At the functional level, both partners have promulgated compulsory wearing of masks by the people, mandated and enforced social distancing norms, and promoted personal hygiene including safety regimes such as lockdown/movement control orders/ breaking virus chain, etc.

Second, it is an opportune moment for the officials of the health departments in India and ASEAN to engage in conversations about sharing best practices to fight the pandemic. A dedicated virtual platform/dashboard designated as 'India-ASEAN Meeting for Health Development (AI-MHD) can be set up, and Health officials can be plugged into the 'ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) Network, the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre, the ASEAN Bio-Diaspora Virtual Center (ABVC) and the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) for future public health emergencies'.⁵

Third is about medical equipment and material and health service capacity building to fight the pandemic. There is a general shortage across the globe of critical supplies of life-saving

drugs, protective health equipment such as masks and personal protective equipment/clothing, medical equipment such as ventilators. India has been supplying COVID-19 associated medicine particularly the Hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug produced in large numbers in India, to over 30 countries including Brazil, several South Asian nations and the United States. Also, India and the US are working together on “developing diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines to combat the disease and recognize the importance of manufacturing critical drugs during this time and making them accessible globally”.⁶

A significant development with regard to capacity building has been medical equipment support provided by India to the Philippines. During a port call at Kochi in India, two Philippine Navy ships (landing ship BRP Davao del Sur and patrol ship BRP Ramon Alcaraz) homebound from Oman, embarked Filipino tourists who were stranded because of travel bans. They also loaded a cargo of 200,000 face masks of a total consignment of one million pieces that were sourced from India.⁷

Fourth, the ‘new Plan of Action (2021-2025)’ enumerated in the Chairman’s Statement of the 16th ASEAN-India Summit, held at Bangkok/Nonthaburi on 3 November 2019, which is the guiding document to further enhance ASEAN-India cooperation, can be recalled, and issues concerning cooperation to fight the COVID-19 pandemic be included.⁸

Fifth, India is committed to ‘active participation and positive contribution to ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus)’ under which New Delhi is committed to ‘effectively respond to traditional and non-traditional security challenges’.

It is the latter which specifically addresses pandemics and India’s contribution in the past has been noteworthy. In 2013, the ADMM-Plus countries held the first ever ADMM-Plus HADR Exercise back-to-back, with the ADMM-Plus Military Medicine (MM) exercise in Brunei Darussalam to ‘represent a concrete demonstration of practical cooperation’. The Indian participation was led by INS Gharial, an amphibious ship, and in a unique act of community service, 50 personnel from the ship donated blood at the Blood Donation Centre, in Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Saleha (RIPAS) Hospital, Muara.

India has also been actively engaged with EWG-MM, where India along with Myanmar co-chaired the 3rd iteration of the EWG-MM. It was noted “under the Myanmar and India Co-chairmanship, the main signature outcomes of their co-chairmanship were the conduct of the ASEAN Military Medicine Conference (AMMC) in 2018 and 2019, respectively, the publication of the ASEAN Military Medicine Handbook (for Paramedics) and the successful execution of the Field Training Exercise (FTX) which was held in [Army Medical Corps Centre and School] Lucknow, India, in February 2019.” It was also recorded that “With the successful completion of

the third cycle of the EWG-MM under Myanmar and India's co-chairmanship, both co-chairs today officially handed over the co-chairmanship of the EWG on MM to Brunei Darussalam and Australia who will be the new co-chair of the next fourth cycle (2020-2023).”

Six, India has acknowledged the importance of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (AOIP) and both partners are committed to “explore cooperation in the key areas outlined in the AOIP, covering maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic cooperation, in order to contribute to the maintenance of peace, freedom and prosperity in the region”. Similarly, ASEAN has endorsed synergies in various sectors and promoted regional frameworks under India’s Act East Policy (AEP) and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision. Although health and pandemic issues are conspicuously absent in the AOIP and SAGAR, these are surely part of the broader thematic issues contained therein.

It is useful to expand, further deepen and strengthen the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership to include joint efforts in the domain of pharmaceuticals, vaccine development, health related industries, and development of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) connected with medical and health related products and services including responding to pandemics, developing accessible and affordable diagnostics, and therapeutics and once developed, make them available, to all.

Closing Remarks

In view of above, a Declaration on ‘India-ASEAN COVID-19 Response’ would be an important policy vector and a new template of India’s ‘Act East’ missions to reflect current realities.

Endnotes

1. Refer, https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Adopted-Joint-Statement_SVCAHMM_COVID-19_20.04.07.pdf
2. Refer, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-Special-APT-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>
3. Author’s own based on WHO COVID-19 Dashboard, available at <https://covid19.who.int/>
4. Refer, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/FINAL-Declaration-of-the-Special-ASEAN-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>
5. Refer, <https://asean.org/press-release-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-asean-intergovernmental-commission-human-rights-aichr/>
6. Refer, <https://in.usembassy.gov/indo-pacific-cooperation-on-covid-19/>
7. Refer, <https://www.defencenews.in/article/PH-Navy-ship-catches-fire,-delaysreturn-from-India-830504>
8. Refer, https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/13400_FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-16th-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf



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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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