BRICS ACTION against COVID-19

In the global war against the novel coronavirus, emerging economies, many belonging to BRICS, have reached out to other countries humbled by the pandemic.

- India has reinforced its credentials as a rapidly emerging pharmacy of the world.
- As the world’s largest producer of hydroxychloroquine, India has recently exported the drug not only to SAARC countries and to its “extended neighbourhood” in the Gulf, but also to Russia, Brazil, Israel and the U.S.
- This has set the stage for India to forge an inclusive BRICS-driven pharma alliance, which could also actively explore the production of vaccines.

Workshop of the world

- Despite allegations that it had delayed sounding the alarm about COVID-19 infections that had broken out in Wuhan, China has, subsequently, responded strongly in containing the pandemic, leveraging its position as the workshop of the world.
- Notwithstanding teething problems and quality concerns, China has steered the transcontinental response to the disease by providing the “hardware” — masks, gloves, coveralls, shoe covers and testing kits — to hotspots across the globe.
- Under its Health Silk Road doctrine, the Chinese reached out to two of the worst global hotspots, Italy and Iran.
- A Chinese shipment of 31 tonnes, which included essential supplies and equipment, including respirators, protective suits, masks and medications, arrived on March 12 in Rome.
- Soon China was running a medical air bridge bound for Europe.
- Despite fighting the virus at home, Russia too sent its doctors and virologists overseas, including the launch of the famous ‘From Russia with love’ air mission to Italy.
- At the request of U.S. President Donald Trump, a Russian Antonov-124, packed with medical supplies and experts, landed at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport.
- Since Soviet times, Russia has top-of-the-line emergency services, which are equipped to handle any kind of emergency including biological attacks, nuclear radiation, and chemical weapon attacks.
- On the African continent, South Africa, the current rotating head of the African Union, is engaged in framing a pan-African response to COVID-19.
- Among the BRICS nations, only Brazil’s response may need a course correction, as its resistance to breaking the infection chains through travel bans, lockdowns, isolation and testing appears to have led to an infection surge.

A template for the future—WAY FORWARD

Having demonstrated their comparative strengths as providers of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), BRICS countries now need to pool and coordinate their efforts, in partnership with the WHO, and Europe and North America, both badly affected by the pandemic, as part of a global assault on the virus.
But for seeding a robust institutional HADR response, the BRICS countries may have to reactivate an existing disaster response mechanism, and earmark resources and assets to combat a whole range of natural disasters, with special focus on the emerging economies and the global south.

The Shanghai-based New Development Bank of the BRICS countries has already demonstrated the way forward to allocate financial resources to combat COVID-19. In April, during a meeting of the NDB Board of Governors, NBD President K.V. Kamath announced that apart from disbursing a $1 billion emergency loan to China, and subsequently to India, South Africa and Brazil, the NDB had the financial heft to provide $10 billion in “crisis-related assistance” to BRICS member countries. The NDB’s financial model, demonstrated to address the pandemic, can now become a template to address natural disasters.