India can absorb shocks of pandemic; take the lead in reshaping Global order

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Part of: GS-II- Global World Order (PT-MAINS-PERSONALITY TEST)

The COVID-19 pandemic has effectively exposed flaws in multilateral structures and highlighted the lacunae in national capacities, particularly in healthcare.

Multilateralism has suffered retrenchment.

- The UN Security Council (UNSC) must be faulted for its egregious lack of action in March 2020 when China held the rotating post of the president. It will remain one of the great ironies of history that China, which has increasingly sought to play a global leadership role, actively suppressed discussions in the face of a monumental threat to the lives and security of millions globally.
- The withdrawal of nearly $500 million worth of annual voluntary funding by the USA to the World Health Organisation (WHO) is a debatable move, notwithstanding the global consensus on the WHO's China-bias.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood out with his initiatives to develop a joint response. In bringing SAARC together to fight the pandemic, Modi said “our neighbourhood collaboration should be a model for the world”.

New Opportunity

- The rapid spread of coronavirus around the world has created fresh opportunities for dialogue.
- There is hope, and scope, for creating a new global compact.
- Contributions will be measured not in dollars alone, but in the leadership that countries exhibit — and their willingness to share ideas and resources to develop an international mechanism for monitoring, verification, early warning and cooperation among nation-states, including in vaccine development.
- Such a framework will have to look beyond the limitations of the WHO.
- In light of COVID-19, there definitely exists a case for the greater scrutiny of “wet markets” in China, south-east Asia, and many other countries around the world.
- Roadside quacks across South Asia, too, are seen extolling the spurious curative powers of lizard oils and other extracts of protected species.
- Even the USA, which has enacted the Endangered Species Act in 1973, has not been able to eradicate animal farms that breed and trade exotic species.

China operates commercial tiger farms for traditional medicine and south-east Asia does likewise with bears for bile extraction. All these activities increase the potential for zoonotic transmission of unknown, deadly viruses.

The need of the hour is to devise means that can deal more effectively with the illegal slaughter of exotic animals. Efforts must be made to strengthen the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a multilateral
treaty with more than 180 member countries. There should be renewed focus not only on the illegal international trade that is already covered by CITES, but also the hazardous exploitation of exotic wildlife species within national borders. All signatory states, including China, must pass and enforce legislation to control the domestic consumption of wild animals. Dubious “wet markets” and animal farms must be shut down.

India’s ROLE

- India’s record of legislation in conservation and enforcement of penalties for the killing and exploitation of protected wildlife is better than most.
- There is considerable scope for the Modi government to take the lead in proposing that CITES be given more teeth to conduct international scrutiny and inspections.
- Individuals with higher immunity levels have a better chance of survival if afflicted with COVID-19.
- The ancient Indian practice of yoga is known to boost immunity levels through the cultivation of a healthy mind and body.
- This is the time to further reinforce the worldwide practice of yoga under the banner of the International Day of Yoga, also an initiative of Modi.
- India should plan for special virtual events on June 21 this year to encourage people around the world to practice yoga to promote holistic health.
- As the world’s largest producer and exporter of cost-effective generic drugs, India’s readiness to ship the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine to fight COVID-19 to others is a “Good Samaritan” act in consonance with the ethos of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”. India is also in the race to produce a vaccine.

If China is a “factory to the world”, India has the potential to be a “pharmacy to the world”. It can even take on a new and well-deserved moniker, that of vishwa vaidya (global physician). This provides an opportunity to promote ayurveda, which complements yoga.

There is talk of the coronavirus having originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, with many theories about biological warfare programmes and accidental release. This provides an opportune moment to turn the spotlight on the inherent weaknesses of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) of 1975. It is a disarmament treaty that does not prohibit the retention and use of biological agents, including coronaviruses, for prophylactic purposes which encompass medical research for diagnosis and immunisation. It has no verification protocol to deal with any suspected use of biological agents. Indeed, the UNSC can investigate complaints in this regard.

Way Forward

In the run-up to the ninth review conference of the BWC in 2021, India could engage in consultations with other middle powers to evolve a regime that can provide better oversight. The very notion of critical infrastructure in the cyber domain is changing in myriad ways with a sudden surge in users and data flow in the digital space. This has created vast new attack surfaces in personal computers for hackers and cybercriminals, both state and non-state.

Post COVID-19, there will be even greater reliance on artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance technologies, online platforms and big data. India must redouble its efforts, along with partners such as the USA, to push for a multi-stakeholder model of internet
governance.

India enjoys good relations with multiple powers and is well-regarded across the developing world. With excellent long-term economic prospects in the decades ahead, a confident India appears fully capable of absorbing the shocks of the pandemic and striding forth to engage a world riven by trade wars and ideological contestation. Despite hardships, India can, and must, take the lead in bringing the world together to practice a new multilateralism that places the common interests of humanity above narrow national interests.