

Concerns over Afghanistan's membership in SAARC arise

Nature of new govt. in Kabul key to continued engagement

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE
NEW DELHI

With uncertainty hanging over the international representation of Afghanistan under the Taliban, a question has risen over its membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is scheduled to meet next in Islamabad. Veteran diplomats here observed that the fate of Afghanistan's membership, and even the future of SAARC to some extent, depends on the Taliban creating an inclusive government.

"The responsibility of inviting the member countries lies with the host, which in this case is Pakistan. After Tuesday's meeting in Doha between Indian Ambassador Deepak Mittal and Taliban's

Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, it appears that the South Block is not averse to revising its policy. Ultimately, it depends on what kind of an inclusive government the Taliban can create in Kabul," said former Indian Ambassador K.P. Fabian.

Despite the Indo-Pakistan political problems that created a hurdle in the smooth functioning of the SAARC in recent years, the organisation's members have maintained coordination in dealing with the pandemic. Pakistan, though not a beneficiary of India's vaccine diplomacy, has participated in discussions on the pandemic at virtual events.

The question on representation of Afghanistan at the SAARC has come up es-

pecially since a similar issue is yet to be addressed by the United Nations. Given the Taliban's past of human rights violations and violent methods, there are concerns about granting it a seat at the world platform. India's main challenge may arise if Pakistan insists on an unreformed Taliban representing Kabul at the SAARC summit. A major disagreement on this line may even splinter the SAARC, said an expert.

Afghanistan was admitted into the SAARC as the eighth member in 2007 when the country was led by President Hamid Karzai.

Over the years, it has found representation in many SAARC projects covering education and sustainable development.