
SAARC: Prospects and Its Relevance

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Abstract

In the face of increasing importance of regionalism, SAARC stands unavoidable and significant organization in South Asia. Since its formation in 1985, it has played an important role by bringing the member countries closer together by holding various meetings and summits at various levels. Though overall development of this organization is marred by internal disputes and various other factors but still its establishment and the sense to develop regional integration has created a hope for its future progress. This research paper analyzes the role of SAARC. A critical evaluation has also been made of why SAARC has not been able to develop at par with other developed organizations like European Union (EU). The potential areas of cooperation have been pointed out and suggestions have been put forwarded for removing the existent hurdles and to move the wheel of integration in South Asia more fastly for improving the conditions of poor people in this region.

Key Words: SAARC, India, Regionalism, Integration, South Asia, Economic Interests, organization

Introduction

The idea of co-operation in South Asia was discussed in at least three conferences: the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhion April 1947; the Baguio Conference in the Philippines on May 1950; and the Colombo Powers Conference held in Sri Lanka in April 1954. In the ending years of the 1970s, the seven inner South Asian nations that included Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka agreed upon the creation of a trade bloc and to provide a platform for the people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding.

President Ziaur Rahman later addressed official letters to the leaders of the countries of the South Asia, presenting his vision for the future of the region and the compelling arguments for region. During his visit to India in December 1977, Rahman discussed the issue of regional cooperation with the Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. In the inaugural speech to the Colombo Plan Consultative

Committee which met in Kathmandu also in 1977, King Birendra of Nepal gave a call for close regional cooperation among South Asian countries in sharing river waters. After

the USSR's intervention in Afghanistan, the efforts to establish the union was accelerated in 1979 and the resulting rapid deterioration of South Asian security situation. Responding to Rahman and Birendra's convention, the officials of the foreign ministries of the seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. The Bangladeshi proposal was promptly endorsed by Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives but India and Pakistan were sceptical initially. The Indian concern was the proposal's reference to the security matters in South Asia and feared that Rahman's proposal for a regional organisation might provide an opportunity for new smaller neighbours to renationalise all bilateral issues and to join with each other to form an opposition against India. Pakistan assumed that it

might be an Indian strategy to organise the other South Asian countries against Pakistan and ensure a regional market for Indian products, thereby consolidating and further strengthening India's economic dominance in the region.

However, after a series of diplomatic consultations headed by Bangladesh between South Asian U.N. representatives at the UN headquarters in New York, from September 1979 to 1980, it was agreed that Bangladesh would prepare the draft of a working paper for discussion among the foreign secretaries of South Asian countries. The foreign secretaries of the inner seven countries again delegated a Committee of the Whole in Colombo on September 1981, which identified five broad areas for regional cooperation. New areas of co-operation were added in the following years. In 1983, the international conference held in Dhaka by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the foreign ministers of the inner seven countries adopted the Declaration on South Asian Association Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and formally launched the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) initially in five agreed areas of cooperation namely, Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities. Officially, the union was established in Dhaka with Kathmandu being union's secretariat-general. The first SAARC summit was held in Dhaka on 7–8 December 1985 and hosted by the President of Bangladesh Hussain Ershad. The declaration signed by King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk, President of Pakistan Zia-ul-Haq, Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, King of Nepal Birendra Shah, President of Sri Lanka JR Jayewardene, and President of Maldives Maumoon Gayoom.

Importance of SAARC for India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is high on the spirit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. The *nashaa* has caught his ministerial colleagues. His swearing-in ceremony was attended by Saarc+1 leaders. Letters were exchanged with each of them and in some cases, gifts also. While Mr Modi chose Bhutan as his first port of call, Union Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj's choice was Bangladesh. Mr Modi is expected to go to Kathmandu next month making it the first prime ministerial visit from India after IK Gujral in 1997. Ms Swaraj will also travel to Kathmandu to revive a 1991 vintage ministerial commission. At the Indian Space Research Organisation's launch of foreign satellites by an Indian work-horse, Mr Modi gushed "*dil maange more*" while advocating a Saarc satellite. A new Saarc headquarters is reported to be coming up in New Delhi. Some of these initiatives are part of Mr Modi's vision to make India strong by accelerating growth and development which can happen only if the neighbourhood is tranquil and the region, physically, emotionally and intellectually interlinked. Saarc is the least-connected regional organisation. One small step towards regional connectivity could be in collectivising Saarc's crown jewel, the United Nations Peacekeeping enterprise, an international experience that soldiers and policemen hanker for. Just last week, a major impasse over reimbursement UN Peacekeepers was resolved three days after the deadline of June 30 had passed. Three years ago at meetings of the Special Advisory Group established for review of 'extra' expenses for blue helmets, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan made their cases informally, speaking in one voice. It is not a day too soon for the

neighbourhood troop-contributing countries to consider forming a regional consultative mechanism under Saarc for UN Peacekeeping. Unfortunately, the Saarc charter excludes security issues though UN Peacekeeping is only soft security. UN Peacekeeping was later added to the UN Charter as it was initially not on it. On drugs and terrorism, there is a Saarc website and a counter-terrorism and piracy convention for intelligence sharing with a monitoring desk in the Maldives. No country should have any objection to starting a process for an institutionalised, consensual and cooperative framework to address UN Peacekeeping problems. This will help keep abreast with the changing dynamics of UN Peacekeeping given the new hybrid missions, declining resources, mounting risks and hazards and the further marginalisation of troop-contributing countries. Europe, Africa, Latin America and even South Asia have regional or sub-regional cooperative institutions, optimising capacities and resources for regional and UN Peacekeeping. Saarc's contribution is exceptional — providing 35 per cent of all UN Peacekeeping troops. The soldiers excel not just in numbers but in quality too and are counted as high-value, high-asset troops and police from the developing world who empathise with the issues of intra-state conflicts in Africa where 80 per cent of UN Peacekeeping missions are committed. The all-women Indian police force deployed in Liberia has been a big hit there since 2007. Inspired, a number of Liberian women have joined their country's police force. Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, in that order, are leading police and troop contributors. With civil wars in Sri Lanka and Nepal terminated, and both countries in a post-conflict situation, vastly experienced soldiers are available for UN

Peacekeeping. Stories of cooperation among Saarc troop-contributing countries are legendary. In Somalia, Indian Air Force's attack-helicopters rescued Pakistani troops from an adverse ground situation. They were the last troops to leave Somalia with the Pakistanis exiting on Indian naval ships. In Congo, Bangladesh peacekeepers in helicopters went to the aid of a Pakistani post, guided by the beleaguered company commander, with Indian Air Force attack-helicopters in close support. Heads of mission and force commanders have found their support staff from one another's countries, so deep and versatile is the regional cooperation in UN Peacekeeping. The vision for regional cooperation in UN Peacekeeping is designed to strengthen the voice of Saarc troop-contributing and police-contributing countries and allow for a more effective disposition in bargaining over strategic, doctrinal and policy issues at the UN, exchanging best practices and engaging in academic and legal research. In short, it is time to bring troop-contributing countries into the decision-making loop — be it mandate crafting, high appointments at the Department of Peacekeeping Operations or other operational and logistics issues. Breaking the monopoly in decision-making of the P5 and other developed countries, who are the principal money-givers for UN Peacekeeping, like the US, EU, Japan, South Korea is also needed. While the developing countries provide the troops, the developed write the cheques. China is the only P5 which sends troops but only in non-combat roles. Developed countries do not have the stomach to take casualties. Regionalising the UN Peacekeeping effort has to happen at two levels: UN Peacekeeping activities and academic research. For the first, the key is evolving an institutional, regional,

consultative mechanism among Saarc member states that will project the group's views at the levels of Foreign Ministers at the UN, Saarc Secretary Generals and respective country's Permanent Missions at the UN. Another mechanism would be for initial discussion on mission mandates by the UN Security Council in coordination with Permanent Missions at New York. Also, the comparative advantages of South Asian troop-contributing countries in developing UN training modules for operations and exchanging best practices for preparation and training in UN Peacekeeping must be leveraged. The academic research work is self-explanatory. It will build a peacekeeping research network to foster regional cooperation. Some preliminary work has already begun at the South Asian University in New Delhi where a regional conference of troop-contributing countries — including civil, military and police personnel — was held in March this year. In the developed world, vast expertise is available on the intricacies of UN Peacekeeping which is a eight billion dollar industry. Confidence-building measures, like the regional consultative mechanism on UN Peacekeeping, will make a good start at the next Saarc summit in November at Kathmandu. What a great asset a South Asian regional peacekeeping force will be in the future, given its composition of the finest and most highly-rated UN Peacekeepers. Maldives and Bhutan, which are not troop-contributing countries at present, should join in. Maldives could join a Sri Lankan or Pakistani contingent while Nepal can collaborate with an Indian. A former Saarc Secretary General has said that in 2011, an Eminent Persons Group did open the door for including UN Peacekeeping in the Saarc charter. This column is a gentle reminder to the Saarc

Programmes Committee meeting next month, prior to the Kathmandu summit. The Modi Saarc *mantra* is needed.

RELEVENCE OF SAARC

The 18th SAARC summit meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal, due to take place between November 26 and 27, provides yet another opportunity for us to examine whether SAARC has been of relevance in the past and how it possibly can be of greater relevance in future. Has SAARC delivered? Has it contributed in any way to make the lives of billions living in the area better? Has it resulted in greater interaction among the SAARC nations? I am afraid the answer to all of these questions is in the negative. If that is the case, how can SAARC be made more effective? Or indeed, do we need SAARC in the first place? These are questions that the people and leaders of the SAARC countries do need to ponder over. SAARC was established in 1980s as the South Asian region's inter-governmental organization with the membership of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The SAARC charter has explained the rationale of SAARC as follows: "..... in an increasingly interdependent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among the Member States....." In 2007, Afghanistan also joined as a full member of the SAARC. Basically, the objective behind formation of SAARC was to emulate from the success of other similar regional bodies such as EU in Europe and ASEAN in South East Asia. While neither EU nor ASEAN has been fully successful in meeting the objectives set by themselves

and there are many detractors of such organizations particularly EU now a days, there is no denying the fact that both these organizations and a few more such as MERCOSUR in Latin America have been instrumental in meeting the objectives set for them at least partially. SAARC, in comparison, has been a non-starter so far. Just to illustrate, the intra-regional trade in goods in the SAARC region remains around five per cent, and in services, barely 0.2 per cent. Intra-regional investment flows have also been at a very low level. To put these figures in perspective, the intra-region trade in ASEAN is 26 per cent, and in MERCOSUR, it is 15 per cent. Even this low level of trade among SAARC countries is basically on account of the traditional relationship between some countries such as that between India and Nepal or India and Bhutan, and has not seen any significant improvements because of SAARC. Indeed, in none of the areas, has the impact of SAARC been visible. While some useful agreements have been signed during previous SAARC summits, their implementation has left much to be desired. The trade agreement - SAFTA-is a case in point. The reasons for SAARC's non-performance are multiple, and these factors need to be understood and steps taken to counter these by all stakeholders, if they wish for SAARC to be successful. Of course, the political tensions between India and Pakistan are an obvious reason. As long as the relations between two biggest member states of SAARC are strained, any action to strengthen SAARC is bound to be extremely difficult. However, unlike the conventional wisdom on the subject, I do not believe that this is the sole problem facing SAARC. Unfortunately most of the SAARC countries have strongly entrenched bureaucracies and interest

groups who look at every issue from a myopic and nationalistic view point. Narrow national interests have invariably triumphed in the region rather than broader regional vision, which of course will also be more beneficial to the individual nations in the long run. Unfortunately some of the countries in the region have been suffering from political uncertainties and the governments there have not been strong enough to take hard decisions which are required to make any meaningful multi-lateral initiatives. Lack of connectivity between different SAARC countries is another reason for the lackluster performance of SAARC so far. Trade and other relations between India and Afghanistan are hampered by the fact that they don't share any border and connectivity through Pakistan, and is dependent upon good relations between India and Pakistan. Similar is the case between Nepal and Pakistan. Add to this, the poor state of critical infrastructure in practically all SAARC countries, and the fact that any trade or contacts between them seems to face major infrastructural issues apart from the obvious political ones. The lack of security and the terrorist threats in most SAARC countries is another hindrance. A fundamental fact which distinguishes SAARC from other such groupings also needs to be understood. Most of such other economic groupings, be it EU or ASEAN, are groupings of the economies, which are more or less equal. Even if some economies are smaller than others, there are three or four equally powerful economies. Unlike any other such groupings, SAARC is dominated by India. India accounts for nearly 60 per cent of SAARC's population, area or GDP. Except for Afghanistan, India shares its

borders with every country in the region, and again, except for Afghanistan, no other country shares a border with any other SAARC country except India. This obvious asymmetry makes meaningful cooperation that much more problematic. However, an important reason for non-performance of SAARC, and which has not got its due attention, is also the psychological framework of its various constituents. Not many countries in the SAARC region identify themselves as predominantly South Asian. Afghans consider themselves more as a Central Asian country, while Pakistan would prefer to be a part of the Middle East. Both Sri Lanka and Maldives think of themselves as much a South East Asian country as a South Asian one. While it may be argued that a country need not identify itself fully with the region for the grouping to be successful, the successful groupings so far, such as ASEAN or EU, have distinct identities which suggest that it is an important ingredient of success. While identification with a region may not be enough for groupings to be successful, they are necessary for its success. So what can be done? Is SAARC doomed to failure or is there a way forward? One can envision three options for SAARC. Option One is to give up SAARC as a non-starter and start looking for other options such as BIMSTEC or any other new group for economic upliftment of area or leave the members of SAARC to find their alternatives. Option two will be to go the whole hog and make efforts to make SAARC fully integrated, at least economically. Proponents of single currency for SAARC seem to take this approach. Neither of these approaches is appropriate, given the geo-political situation of today. While SAARC has not met the expectations it has generated, the very fact that it gives opportunities for the

leaders as well as the operating level officials to interact regularly and discuss issues of mutual concern is reason enough for SAARC to remain relevant. The problems faced by the SAARC countries are similar and distinct from other regions. The solutions, therefore, are best found with mutual cooperation in the region. For this reason itself SAARC continues to be relevant. At the same time, it needs to be understood, that unfortunately SAARC continues to be affected by the historical baggage it carries. It will be unrealistic to talk of single currency when the two biggest nations of the region are not even on talking terms. The feasible alternative, therefore, is to take small steps. Steps that will further integration, but are workable, given the geopolitical realities of the region. What are these steps? There is no denying the fact that growth in trade and commerce within the region is an extremely important step in this direction. Agreements for this purpose that have been signed earlier do exist. What is required is to operationalise these. If for whatever reasons some countries are not in a position to do so, it will be better for those countries that can do so to move forward. To give momentum to this process, one or two projects at the sub-regional level could be identified and vigorously implemented within a specific time frame. These projects, if successful, can show the benefits of mutual cooperation and could persuade the doubting Thomas's to join in. What is also required is for SAARC to concentrate its activities in core identified areas and not lose its direction by getting involved in too many activities. Since India is literally the pivot around which SAARC revolves, the major responsibility for making SAARC a success is upon India. It, therefore, needs to show

willingness and undertake asymmetric responsibilities where required. Each SAARC country also has to realize that while the political situation in individual countries may keep on changing, the economic situation does not change so rapidly and, as it exists, requires really serious efforts for improvement. At the end of the day, it is the economy which matters for the impoverished people of the region. SAARC can and should be the instrument for leaders of the region to improve the economic situation of the people of the region, even if to begin with, it is in baby steps.

Prospects of SAARC

Though the formation of SAARC is a landmark step taken by the leaders of the region, the main rationale behind its establishment is to develop a conducive environment where all nations may interact peacefully with each other, cultivate sustainable peace and promote mutual economic well-being by utilizing available resources in the region through the peaceful process of economic cooperation. Nevertheless, after more than two decades of its establishment, neither South Asian nations have been able to push the process of integration into full swing nor the organization itself has become viable enough to promote harmony and economic integration for preventing conflicts in the region. Everything with SAARC is not gloomy. In fact, the establishment of this important organization is the proof that the regional neighbors want to achieve progress and, in fact, under the IPA, the member countries have been cooperating in various social, economic and security fields. We can be optimistic about the future of SAARC because both India and Pakistan are now on the way to move ahead with peace initiatives. We can hope

better that this regional organization has got enormous potential in the face of changing trends. The people of South Asia cannot be ignorant of the lost opportunities for their own prosperity and welfare. Indeed, they are well aware of the advantages of closer cooperation between the nations of South Asia. It is, therefore, time to re-invent the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizen activism, which will lead to a better environment for confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia and in turn lead to a better South Asia.

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