

SAARC: Challenges and Reforms

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Abstract

Today, the world is at a turning spot. The changes that we are undergoing are universal in scope, radical, indispensable and structural in content. As we have arrived the 21st century a sense of hopefulness prevails for achieving harmony and prosperity through effective role-play of regional as well as worldwide organizations. Many outlook Asia as having a variety of characteristics in familiar with Europe of the nineteenth century: developing international organizations, mixed domestic orders, increasing nationalism, high but differential growth rates, and bitter, emotional rivalries between insecure neighbours. The accomplishment of states in today's world is not so much measured in terms of capacity for defending borders or generating uniquely state organizations, but in terms of ability to adapt to regional and global trends, endorse exports, draw investments, and skilled labour, deliver a advantageous environment for transnational companies, build good-looking institutions of research and higher learning, wield political influence on the regional and global scene, and also brand the state culturally in the worldwide market-place.

Keywords: -Nation, Domestic, Mutual, Achievements, World, Dispute, Cooperation

Introduction: -

SAARC is a manifestation of the determination of the individuals of South Asia to unite regionally and to work together towards finding keys to their mutual problems in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. The collective economy of SAARC is 3rd major in the world in the terms of GDP(PPP) after the United States of America and China and 8th biggest in the terms of nominal GDP. SAARC countries comprise 3% of the globe's area and in contrast having 21% (around 1.7 billion) of the world's whole population. India makes up over 70% of the area and population among these eight countries. The idea of regional collaboration in South Asia was first mooted in May 1980. The Foreign Secretaries of the seven nations, particularly, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981 which led to the identification of five comprehensive areas (Agriculture, Rural Development, Telecommunications, Meteorology, and Health and Population Activities) for regional co-operation. Subsequently four other areas (Science and Technological co-operation, Transport, Postal Services and Sports, Arts and Culture) were recognized for regional cooperation. The SAARC Preferential Trading Agreement was signed in April 1993 in Dhaka. It

paved way to the Treaty on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). SAFTA was signed by all the member countries during the twelfth 'SAARC Summit' held in Islamabad.¹

Factors responsible for less progress: -

SAARC is a regional organization with solid ambitions, but is constrained by regional politics compared to other regional organizations such as the European Union or the ASEAN. The record of its success is hardly impressive. Despite the geo-strategic position, the area is one of the poorest, socially complex, under developing and slightest integrated in the world. SAARC has accomplished 28 years of its existence. Although it's not a long period for a regional friendship to establish its worth in supporting regional cooperation and solidarity, however, the way SAARC has shown downward trends throughout these years. There are many challenges and hurdles being faced by SAARC in the way of regional collaboration. No doubt, the tension between India and Pakistan hinders the SAARC from functioning efficiently. From over six years, the two neighbors have remained mired in an adversarial situation, which has been one of neither conflict nor harmony. The responsibility for changing these precarious conditions rests on both sides but India being the major political player, obviously carries a larger share of the responsibility for changing a highly volatile condition, which can generate hostilities between the two nuclear countries. Kashmir has continued the bone of contention between India and Pakistan. Numerous attempts have been made so far towards the normalization of their relations. Their contradictory relations have wide ranging implications for the region and the SAARC.²

The insistence of some of the SAARC nations on forming sub regional groupings has also reduced the status of SAARC. In fact, the ineffectiveness of SAARC leads to the growth of an alternative approach. In this context, India, in recent years, has started giving prominence to its entry in the ASEAN because India sees more prospects of its progress by aligning its economy with the ASEAN countries. Indian strategists have advocated that New Delhi would be better off in the ASEAN than it is in the SAARC. In this observe Pakistan has made grave efforts in rising close relations with west Asia and the gulf region by using its Islamic character. Bangladesh, also playing up its Islamic roots, has begun to improve its relation with its Muslim neighbors in the Southeast Asia –Indonesia and Malaysia. Nepal has also prepared periodic efforts resisting Indian stress by developing nearer ties with China. Bharat, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka are the affiliates of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisector Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). Pakistan and Maldives are not associates of both South Asian sub regional organizations.

SAARC as a regional inter-governmental organization is very special as far as local disputes are concerned. The regional countries do not have a common approach to resolving interstate conflicts in the region. Bharat focus on bilateralism and rejects the part of other provincial powers in shaping regional conflict. On the other side, other regional states do not decline the part of extra-regional powers. It seems that the South Asian countries have not been capable to develop clear perspectives on domestic and local issues. Their internal problems have often

formed their stance towards the SAARC. It seems that due to definite preconceived notions SAARC has not been viewed as an independent variable. Other reasons relate to a lack of convergence of political security of the member states as also a nonappearance of a perceived danger to their vital interest from common opponent factors, which contributed towards the viability of other regional grouping such as the European Union and the ASEAN. Besides these political changes and mutual distrust among the member countries of SAARC, another severe hurdle to the functioning of the organization is the asymmetry between India and the other member in terms of demography and economic and technological progress. It is a strange feature of SAARC that India overpowers the other member states due to its size of population and GDP. India is closely thrice the size of all the other states put together in area and population. This preponderance is replicated in its economy, technological development and military competency. New Delhi contains more than three quarters of the regional GDP and two-thirds of the region's worldwide exports. Besides, India is located in the center of the region while other countries are on the periphery. Therefore, India linked all member states and provided the connection amongst all member states. Therefore, it is correct to say that the region cannot move forward without the support of India. All the South Asian states form border with India. These nations have bilateral arrangements with India. It is challenging to find an easy regional alternative to these bilateral arrangements.

The serious constraint in this regard is that none of these states form border with each other, except India. India alone can offer transit facilities to landlocked countries like Nepal and India. Another main hurdle is that the region is divided into two groups: Middle income group and the least developed group. Pakistan, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka belong to the first group while Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal are in the second group. This inequality between the both groups resulted in decrease of economic corporation in the region. The second group needs special and preferential treatment which is not easier for other South Asian nations. Besides these, the extent of complementarities which represents the level of economic collaboration in a region is very poor in the case of SAARC. Most associates of the SAARC export similar products. They contend rather than support each other.³ The formation of the SAARC should be seen as a fresh departure from conventional ways by which weaker authorities have tried to counter a much stronger one. Instead of countering strength by a system of associations, other countries have tried to draw the stronger one into their arms, in order to disarm it and make its 'preponderant strength innocuous'. Thus, the smaller nations of southern Asia, hope through the SAARC to be capable to forestall the use of that greater power (India) for hostile purposes especially with regard to the formation of a new coercive order on the subcontinent.⁴

It has been argued that to some extent, the SAARC is a reply to the globalism that is being progressively dominated by the G7. It is also a reply to the increasing regionalism around the world. It should also be seen as a reply to the felt regional requirements. Given the political realities, particularly Indo-Pakistan associations and the other disputes that split Indian society, SAARC can only be a promoting device in possible areas. Since India is the 'core state', it

should be seen as a strength for the success of the SAARC and also a nation that can be counted on for regional collaboration.⁵ Almost all the agreements and conventions, adopted and signed by SAARC members, are concentrating on promotion of economic and social interactions and relations. There is hardly any important development, under the banner of SAARC, to encourage mutual trust and resolve common disputes. Dispute deciding has been, unfortunately, left out of the scope of SAARC; since its inception. Even “SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism” was nothing but ratification and execution of the UNO resolutions and conventions. Almost all SAARC bodies and other bodies and offices are working in the social fields. Political fields and development of trust and promotion of cooperation in political fields have been left out of the focus.⁶

The regional economies, however, are facing slumping claim for their exports, significant decrease in foreign investment particularly foreign direct investment. The decline in exports has weakened the region's current account situation. Despite the fact that the region constitutes about one-fifth of humanity and massive resources, it is confronted with the formidable tests posed by poverty, unemployment, low levels of manufacture and burden of population. These restrictions have severely hampered the efforts to accomplish the SAARC objectives of encouraging welfare of the people of the South Asia and improving quality of life through enhanced economic growth, social progress and cultural progress in the region.⁷ India has excluded Pakistan from the list of SAARC member states with which it will be connecting its state-of-the-art National Knowledge Network (NKN) for distribution technical databases and remote access to higher research services. The government has kicked off the course of appointing a telecom corporation that will attach and expand the NKN to research and learning networks in six South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation member countries — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Pakistan is only the SAARC state that has been left out of this proposal.⁸

The next problem is the influence of China's unprecedented forays into each of these nations. Instead of telling the Nepal govt. to sort out matters with India, for example, as it had in the past, China opened up an array of alternative trade and connectivity possibilities after the 2015 India-Nepal border blockade: from the highway to Lhasa, cross-border railway lines to the progress of dry ports. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan, China grips strategic real estate, which could also be fortified militarily in the future. At present, it means China has a stake in the inner politics of those countries.⁹

Issues before SAARC: -

The fortune of SAARC nation at present is to either swim mutually or risk sinking individually in the battle against poverty and unemployment as well as in conference the hurdles of the environment, national safety, and globalization.

Now a day, there are five crucial issues on SAARC: -

First, SAARC is off and on in a limbo. Thus the first concern is this: how to grapple with SAARC's indefinite future and how to put it back on the rails again, and not permit in the future, international political changes disturbing the functioning of SAARC.

Second, SAARC has to resolve whether essential economic collaboration in an increasingly globalised world economy can be accomplished despite continuing political battles.

The issue is whether political differences — beyond vital state interest matters — can be set aside by each member state while a more harmonious environment is shaped through healthy economic cooperation.

Third, is SAARC so fragile that it cannot persist if bilateral controversial political questions are elevated in its deliberations without undermining its utility?

Fourth, given that India is 70 per cent of SAARC nations, geographically and economically, and that the other SAARC nations have borders only with India and not with each other, unlike in the European Union, does India have the distinct responsibility to go the extra mile to make SAARC work?

Fifth, given the way WTO disciplines are to be obligatory, does SAARC need a “level playing field” regional treaty, modelled on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, with cross-retaliatory powers and a Regional Trade Organization (RTO) to implement it?¹⁰

A road map for reforms: -

To address these five concerns and overcome the present impasse in SAARC and to make it work, two preconditions have to be achieved:

(1) India has to go the extra mile to make SAARC work because India is 70 per cent of SAARC, and has mutual borders with seven SAARC Countries.

(2) South Asian Nations have to work on the mutual values and public historical perceptions of the individuals of the region, consciously addressing needed political differences.

Transparency in action in bilateral dealings is main to attaining these two preconditions. No nation of the region should either act the big brother or be a dog in the manger.

Hence, mindful of the uphill duty of promoting South Asian regional integration, there are some following reforms:

- (a) No SAARC countries should internationalise any bilateral matter beyond the SAARC forum.
- (b) SAARC will do all it can to facilitate the formation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) immediately. After that, SAARC decides to create Sri Lanka's coast the entryway to

the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by increasing the solid substructure and goods movement facilitation.

(c) SAARC should strive to improve investment activity between its member countries, and not merely trade. South Asian joint venture upgrade schemes should also be promoted on a priority.

(d) The energy division should be associated together through a united South Asian electric power grid system and states could pool their technological and economic resources in united projects.

(e) In only the sectors of science and technology, universities in SAARC states should pool their faculties and converse across boundaries or engage in online learning using the Internet.

(f) Broader admired support at the ground level must be vastly developed by cheering freer legal movement of citizens for financial and cultural tourism reasons by minimising immigration measures.

(g) Valuable steps must be undertaken to commonly discourage cross-border, illegal migration, terror attacks and chunk the narcotics purchase and sell and drug trafficking.

It should be recalled that the EU was made possible only due to the conclusion drawn by the people of Europe, after the experience of two dreadful world wars, that a 3rd world war would finish Europe totally. Hence, despite a fierce history of warfare, European countries sank their differences and shaped the EU. Furthermore, there were some leaders like Adenauer, de Gaulle, Schuman and de Gasperi who had an image of a peaceful progress of the continent and dared to embark towards this objective.

But as the standard saying goes, it takes two to tango. With two of the eight SAARC nations in control of deliverable nuclear arms, it is imperative for the nonviolent subsistence of SAARC nations that they efficiently bind as one and raise harmoniously.¹¹

Time for renewal: -

Reflecting on this perspective, one is reminded of a South African maxim, which says one must create a stranger to refurbish oneself. The stranger is the extra that renews the self, reveals the unities and reciprocities behind dissimilarity. In the South Asian framework, India must adjust these words of wisdom by inventing and reinventing the neighbour each day. It has to discover a South Asia, which is civilization, reciprocal, regional in its multiplicity. Merely thinking as a nation state reveals the procrustean nature of the Indian brain, making it a sufferer of 19th century mindsets.

Even experiments, which could have been promising, have lost their imaginative power. One of the most thrilling of these local ideas was the formation of the South Asian University (SAU), with a staff from all South Asian nations. While we have the staff, what we lack is a South Asian theory of civilization and knowledge, which should anchor this imagination. South Asian

University looks like any other campus, branch of the embassy set in South Delhi. It wants a proposal, which makes South Asia central to its imagination. Such a proposal must change ecology and culture into a assumption of South Asian variety and difference. The borderland, the frontier, the island, the riverine communities have to anchor a confined imagination which diversifies South Asia as a region. Out of ecology should come out a original sense of regionalism as a new approach of ecological politics rather than treating the region as a smaller order of politics in a worldwide regime.¹²

Conclusion

India has no reason to shed moan for the SAARC. It is no longer the only game in township. in reality, it was never much of a game, nor should it grief the passing away of “South Asia”. Transform is the only enduring fact of living. Geographies are not permanent; they evolve, sometimes softly and rapidly at others. How we visualize and construct regions changes according to circumstances. The British Raj extensive from Aden to Malacca at its climax. “South East Asia” did not stay alive until the second World warfare. The “Asia-Pacific” originated into practice only in the late 1980s. The “Indo-Pacific” was a novelty a decade before. “Political South Asia” was a progress of the 1980s.¹³ It has not sustained the test of time. As India’s footstep goes way beyond the Subcontinent, Bangladesh growths the throbbing heart of the Bay of Bengal and a financial bridge to East Asia and Sri Lanka rises as an Indian Ocean hub, Delhi desires to reimagine it’s financial and political geography.

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