

SAARC: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ITS DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, South Asia has been described as a 'region without regionalism'.¹ The post war period saw the great up surage of Asian Nationalism and crumbling of the colonial empires. A number of newly states emerged on the map of South Asia.² Ending of British rule in South Asia two big countries Islamic Republic of Pakistan and India created on the map of the world. Political independence of Burma and Ceylon followed in 1948. Indonesia became independent in 1949, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and Srilanka appeared as independent states on the map of South Asia. This region, which is clearly demarcated geographically by the Indian ocean and the Himalayan and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, was previously characterized by a paradox with respect to forms of cooperation.³ They also faced by the persistence of the problems of low rates of economic growth, high rates of population growth, heavy pressure of population on land, scarcity of natural resources under utilization of large man-power resources, income inequality, illiteracy and infant mortality, lack of safe water supplies for large population, recurring food shortages in spite of predominance of agriculture in the economics of this region. Not only this, but south Asia is increasingly becoming an important region in international politics. It figures in the strategic calculations of the United States, the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).⁴

Over the last four decades the security perceptions in this area have also undergone a sea change. Security and defence perceptions in the area as varied as there are states and uniform and verified view of security remains illusive. The politics are rather fragile.⁵

Given the nature of the region, external powers have felt tempted not only to take interests but also to intervene in the internal affairs of the south Asian countries and at times such interventions have been sought by the countries themselves. The strategic situation of the region, flanked by west Asia and south east Asia, has further encouraged the super powers and major powers to exploit the contradictions in the region in pursuit of their strategic interest.⁶

ORIGIN

The origin of SAARC in its present form could be traced to the proposals mooted by the late President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh in 1980 followed by the circulation of a Working Paper on South Asia Regional Cooperation in November 1980. The formal discussions for the establishment of an institutional mechanism for regional cooperation in South Asia started with the Colombo meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of the seven States of South Asia region, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in April 1981.⁷

The evolution of regional organization in South Asia has indeed been very late in comparison to various other regions of the world, including other Asia regions. The reasons generally cited were differences among the States of the region, the most important among them being India and Pakistan. True to this background the major States of South Asia exercised caution in the talks held at Colombo in April 1981 and the subsequent meetings of Foreign Secretaries of the participating countries at Katmandu in November 1981 and Islamabad in August 1982. Finally in December 1985 at the Dhaka summit, the heads of states of South Asia, the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SARRC) was launched formally.⁸

CHARTER

The SARRC Charter reaffirmed, the conviction of the member States about the necessity and desirability of regional cooperation and declared that SAARC was intended to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life, to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia.⁹ The Charter also enunciated that cooperation within the framework of SAARC should be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit. The principles of Non-Alignment and the UN were also affirmed as the guiding forces of SAARC.

However, the evolution of SAARC with its lofty principles and objectives at a time when the growing internal problems within the member States and increasing mutual differences among the States of South Asia by no means reflected the ambience of regional cooperation. The attitude of the major States was rather cryptic whereas the smaller States evinced more enthusiasm.

FRAME WORK

As regards the institutional framework of the SAARC, a four-tier institutional set up is envisaged and became operational for SAARC. At the apex level is the summit meeting which takes place once every year. The second tier of the structure is the Council Of Ministers, consisting of foreign ministers of the member States. The third one in the ladder is the Standing Committee consisting of foreign secretaries of member countries and the bottom line consists of Technical Committees on various subjects of cooperation consisting of

representatives of the member States.¹⁰

The SAARC Secretariat came into existence in February 1987 with headquarters at Katmandu. It is headed by a Secretary General and also consists of seven directors, one each from the member countries.¹¹

SAARC, though a late comer on the international scene, has been quite ahead of other regional organizations, like ASEAN in matters of institutional framework. But the institutional mechanism established by SAARC is rather modest compared to similar other organizations.

While comparing SAARC with other regional organizations it is found that in more of the cases political, social and ideological convergence facilitated their evolution. In the case of SAARC in spite of the existence of social, cultural and ethnic commonalities, the strategic, ideological divergence stemming from religious divergence and antagonistic political postures are found to be causing most of the damage to the unity of the region. However, the evolution of SAARC indicates the desire of the countries of South Asia to bring about a unity to realize the regional cooperation.

DIVERGENT FACTORS

The study also indicates that the countries of South Asia are characterized by internal turmoils and problems of political stability and national integration. All the States of the region have been facing this problem during the past few decades. Moreover the social, cultural, ethnic and religious affiliations of the people of the region transcending national boundaries created a crisis of mutual confidence and distrust. It is a common feature of the region that each of the State accuses its neighbour State for its internal troubles. Thus the political diversity and antagonism developed in the evolution of the major

States of the region is further aggravated by the internal problems faced by the States.

Another divergent factor is the religious composition of these States. While India and Nepal are predominantly Hindi States (though India is secular in its political system and social ethos), Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives are Islamic States with strong fundamentalist bias and Sri Lanka and Bhutan have Buddhism as their main religion. The role of religion in most of these States adds a new dimension to the mutual distrust and antagonism of the States of South Asia.

Naturally, it is found that the divergent character of the political systems of the region results in a varied approach in their external relations. It also follows that their ideological postures, strategic perceptions and attitudes to the global issues are also born out by a characteristic difference.

However the South Asia States are one in their economic backwardness. All of them are predominantly agricultural (primary product) economies and heavily rely on the developed countries for their economic survival. The dependence of the South Asian States on the developed world is vindicated by the pattern of their external trade, balance of trade and payments position and their overgrowing external debt.¹²

INDO - PAK RELATIONS

India-Pakistan bilateral relations occupy the centre-stage of the South Asia relations. Pakistan, a creation by the partition of India on the basis of the two-nation theory sought to create a threat perception against India from the very beginning. Moreover, she has disputed accession of Kashmir to India and ever since made it a bone of contention between herself and India. Though Kashmir became an integral part of

India, Pakistan tries to make up the Kashmir issue time and again and even fought three wars with India on this question.

Based on religious rivalry and territorial claims Pakistan maintained adversarial relations with India throughout the past four and a half decades. The India-Pakistan relations all these years were characterized by a chilling on-war-on-peace syndrome. Both the neighbours have been engaged in an unending arms race neglecting their major problem of economic development. Each one wanted to gain a military superiority over the other. Latest, the arms race has assumed new dimensions with Pakistan acquiring the nuclear capability.

Another feature on India-Pakistan bilateral relationship is the mutual accusation about the interference in each others internal affairs. Particularly Pakistan's interference in the Punjab and Kashmir crises during the past few years has been a source of irritation. Pakistan also accuses India of fanning the secessionist movements in Sindh. But Pakistan's involvement in Kashmir assumed alarming proportions of late and even brought both the countries to the brink of war.¹³

INDIA - SRILANKA

India and Sri Lanka bilateral relations witnessed some irritants in the early periods, i.e. in 1950s and 1960s over the question of repatriation of the plantation Tamils. Sri Lanka maintained distance from India during the 1960s and 1970s because of differences over ideological, strategic and political issues and because of the apprehensions about domination by India. The feeling of distrust nursed by Sri Lanka was mostly due to psychological reasons. Dispute over Kachativia island and the demarcation of maritime boundaries also caused some irritants in their bilateral relations. They were, however,

resolved in the mid-1970s during the regimes of Indira Gandhi in India and Sirimao Bandarnaike in Sri Lanka. The most serious problems between the two countries causing severe strains in their relations has been the Tamil separatist movement in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The problem still remains unresolved and India-Sri Lanka relations also remain in state of serious disenchantment.¹⁴

INDIA - BANGLADESH RELATIONS

India-Bangladesh relations were very cordial in the first five years after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent State. This was mainly due to the role played by India in the liberation of Bangladesh. But the labour of love were lost soon and Bangladesh developed and maintained consistently anti-India postures during the past one and a half decades. Significantly, rise of Islam as the State religion of Bangladesh and the growth of anti-India postures went hand in hand in Bangladesh. There were however some issues like the sharing of Ganga waters, ownership of the New Moore island, Chakma refugees and the Tin Bigha corridor etc. which caused estrangement of India and Bangladesh relations.¹⁵

INDIA - NEPAL RELATIONS

India-Nepal relations also have been witnessing strains over the issue of trade and transit treaties between the two countries. Besides, the nepalese resented the influence of India over the political turbulence rising time and again in Nepal. Nepal also resented the basic reality that its dependence on India was heavy and crucial to its very existence. Hence Nepal considered it necessary to reduce its dependence on India for its independence and survival. India-Nepal relations suffered severe setback during the late 1980s over the issue of trade and transit treaties and also over the Chinese arms sales to Nepal. However, India-Nepal relations improved and became quite cordial during the past few years because of the

changes that have taken place in the political system of Nepal.¹⁶

INDIA - BHUTAN RELATIONS

India-Bhutan and India-Maldives relations are quite cordial and are free from tensions. Maldives did not have any close relations with India until recently, however, it has now a very cordial relations with India. This is particularly so since the Indian assistance extended to Maldives in thwarting the attempted coup by some mercenaries of Sri Lanka origin. India-Bhutan relations are also marked by cordinality. Bhutan depends heavily on India for its economic survival and external relations. Recently Bhutan has been trying to diversify its external relations and also assert its identity as an independent State.

Another main theme is the influence of the major external powers, i.e. the United States, Soviet Union and China, on the intra-regional relations of South Asia and the prospects of regional cooperation. It has been attempted to analyse in historical perspective the relations between India, the core of South Asian region and her neighbours, particularly Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and the way they have been affected adversely by the involvement of these major powers in this region.¹⁷

The most important influence on south Asian relations and the prospects of regional cooperation in south Asia has been that of the United States of America. Considering South Asia as a strategically important region in the context of the cold-war political at the global level the US wanted to befriend either of the major States of South Asia, India or Pakistan, to counter the spread of communism. Though initially the US was interested in India, India did not fall in line with the US thinking as she advocated the policy of non-alignment (keeping away

from the super-power rivalries) from its early years of independence. US, then turned towards Pakistan which was quite enthusiastic about the idea, as it served her interest of countering the power and influence of India in South Asia. The US and Pakistan entered into formal alliance in 1955 and Pakistan joined willingly all collective security arrangements sponsored by the US. Then onwards US and Pakistan remained close allies except for small intervals of lukewarm relationship.¹⁸

South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC) was formed in 1983 but it was not until 1985 that it started seeking concrete results. The countries of South Asia, one-fifth of the entire humanity are: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, India and Sri Lanka. They share many common values that are rooted in their social, ethnic, cultural and historical traditions. Regional collaboration or cooperation for the resolution of common problems and achievements of mutually shared goals in a region is generally accepted as an important mode of interaction across the territorial boundaries of a state. The idea of SAARC is to promote greater interaction and understanding, increase mutual relevance and inter-dependence amongst the regional states.

Geographical proximity, coupled with the overlapping historical experiences, traditions, common problems of development and social change underlined the need of pooling the resources of the South Asian states. The idea of South Asian Regional Cooperation was mooted by the late President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh in 1980. He was keen to hold a summit meeting of the seven South Asian countries in order to deliberate on establishing an appropriate machinery to promote cooperation among the countries of the region. The response of Pakistan and India to the proposal was not very encouraging. India feared that her smaller

neighbours might gang up against her in the bilateral problems with the New Delhi, and Pakistan thought that India, being the biggest country in the area, would dominate that organisation. However on second thought, both the countries joined it. Establishment of SAARC was also encouraged by international agencies like UNDP. Although President Zia-ur-Rehman did not succeed to hold a summit in his life, Bangladesh did succeed in bringing the seven nations foreign secretaries together at Colombo in 1981. From 1981 to 1983, these countries held four meetings and agreed on the feasibility of South Asian Regional Cooperation and recommended to their respective governments to hold meeting at foreign Ministers level. The foreign Ministers in their turn held three annual conferences and prepared ground for holding the SAARC summit conference on December 7, 8, 1985 in Dhaka. 19

REGIONAL COOPERATION AT A GALANCE

Though the goals of regional cooperation adopted by the SAARC embrace specially selected areas of economic and cultural activities, there is clear awareness of the mutually supportive roles of such cooperation in the political field. As a matter of fact, one of the objectives that inspired the countries of the region to participate in the SAARC was to create, through regional cooperation in economic and cultural fields, an environment conducive to confidence - building and generation of friendly and constructive cooperation in the political field.

On global security, the Dhaka summit did not go beyond routing mention of "unprecedented escalation of arms particularly in its nuclear aspects". Here again, the question of global arms race and nuclear build-up was linked with Indo Pakistan arms race and nuclear proliferation threat. On these issues, regional approach between these two countries was suggested. All this suited neatly to the strategic views of the Western powers and

China on the region. Not surprisingly, therefore, they promptly and generously, welcomed the summit.

Notwithstanding this, the summit reiterated the prevailing South Asian consensus on Northern-South issues, including the flow of concessional assistance, improvement in world trading through GATT, failure of international strategy and substantial new programme of action for the least developed countries. To achieve better coordination among South Asian countries in international economic forum, it was decided to convene a ministerial level meeting in Pakistan after adequate preparation were made by technical experts.²⁰

The SAARC or any cooperation formula would go into the dustbin of history, unless the problems like Kashmir and ethnic confrontation in Sri Lanka or Indo-Bangladesh issues are solved. The seven SAARC members India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan are independent, sovereign states. The best that can be hoped for is that the member-states will not let their bilateral differences stand in the way of cooperation. A difficult task indeed. Though who argue that confidence building is all that is required to resolve bilateral problems between member-states of SAARC forget that these problems are linked with their very statehood. President Zia said in Colombo on 15 December 1985 "in this 20th century you cannot allow a country to be wrecked from within. We must support each other to maintain integrity. If it is Sri Lanka today it may be us tomorrow. Sri Lanka is a member of the UN, the NAM and the SAARC with us. Besides we have bilateral relations. What is the use of all this if we cannot support each other".²¹

Whether SAARC has managed to create an environment where a serious bilateral effort can begin to resolve the deep and bitter problems that have bedeviled

neighbours as close (both geographically and otherwise) as India and Pakistan? The answer to such questions are the real tests for the success of SAARC.

CONCLUSION

A great variety of proposals has been made regarding the expansion of the SAARC process. They have ranged from suggestions for a free trade area and a customs union to institutionalized cooperation. The proponents of well-structured regional cooperation have argued that without regional institutions and relatively autonomous leadership, meaningful progress cannot be made in wider areas of economic integration. From their perspective only substantial institutionalized policy cooperation would facilitate self-reliant industrialization, trade liberalization, reduction of foreign corporate control, and direction of international firms to common industrial policies in the region. Impressed by the political designing of the EEC and ASEAN. South Asian countries have established a regional organization with the specific objective of promotion of cooperation in functional areas. Proponents of regional integration in South Asia have stressed the need for cooperation in the important areas of commerce and industry. Regardless of the good intentions behind ambitious integrative schemes, their feasibility appears unrealistic in the present state of South Asian geopolitics. Parochial nationalism has not weakened enough and the salience of economic issues has not been internalized sufficiently to pave the way for comprehensive cooperation.

The South states have made a beginning in determining means by which they can benefit from one another through expanding economic cooperation. An experimental and incremental approach to regional cooperation which will allow time to reflect upon collective achievements and the possible utility of integrative activities seems more suitable to South Asian conditions. Due to

procedural difficulties of the consensual process, progress in regional cooperation might be slow, but it remains the only viable mechanism to prevent disorientation or malfunctioning of the process.

The SAARC is employing a primarily evolutionary process requiring caution and patience in formulating workable schemes. The program under IPA reflects pragmatism as it focuses on areas in which political controversies have little chance to interfere. So far, the South Asian states have not initiated the redirection of their trade from metropolitan economies to local markets, a process which would require substantial political commitment and fundamental shift in national planning. They are limited for the obvious reasons of political disharmony of the past decades.

The SAARC process will remain slow fragmented, and even disjointed, owing mainly to the interplay of political factors. The integration of regional planning and the freeing of trade, which should be the central objectives of regional cooperation, would remain heavily dependent upon the motives of the main actors-India and Pakistan. At present, proposals for trade liberalization, economic integration, and structured cooperation appear to be unacceptable as they are seen as having the potential for the institutionalization of Indian hegemony. The large size of India, its comparative advantage in industrial development, and the apprehensions that persist about her future role in the area are the main obstacles to the requisite political commitment to the SAARC process. Besides that the out-come of the Indian Scenario is being increasingly steered by the right wing B.J.P., hence nothing can be predicted right now. Never-the-less efforts to develop its role shall continue unabated regardless of Indian political vacillations and changes.

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