

REGIONALISM AND SAARC

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This research paper has two main parts. The first part deals with the concept of Regionalism, and the second part deals with the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) and its purposes.

Regionalism may be simply defined as a "geographical term for socio-political movements which seek to foster or protect an indigenous culture in particular region".¹

Regionalism has become very important in the modern period. The essential element for a regional organisation is to develop a sense of community among states situated in a compact geographical area. Because geography is one of the most important factors affecting capability, its components being location, size, topography, climate and shape. In regional arrangements few countries united by some geographic, culture, historical associations, economic and financial ties, political liberal mindedness and similarity of social institutions or by some combination of all these factors. Experience in creating regional associations, has fostered to develop the integrative political behaviour. The concept of regionalism denotes community relationship at the national or regional level.

REGIONALISM AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION

One of the oldest forms of political activity has been alliance formations. "Greek city states formed

Grassroots

leagues to limit or reduce the influence and power of Athens and Sparta".²

Historians have traced the ideal of world cooperation as means of achieving peace and human betterment. Another early example was the Amphictyonic Council -- an organization of Greek cities between the third and first centuries, B.C.

"Efforts towards International Cooperation have also been aided by the writings of influential statesmen, including Henry IV of France, William Penn, Simon Bolivar, Woodrow Wilson and many others".³

In modern times Governments and people have experienced two general international organisations. These are; the League of Nations and United Nations. The League of Nations was the first attempt to build a universal, socio-political order after the First World War.

The United Nations was formulated in October 1945 after the Second World War. The purposes of the United Nations are; maintaining peace and security and also to develop friendly relations among nations for achieving international cooperation in economic, social, cultural and humanitarian matters.

The role of regional arrangements with particular reference of United Nations and its predecessor can be considered as a supplementary tool in maintaining world peace. The covenant of the League of Nations, in article 21, had made a provision for regionalism by stating that "nothing in this covenant shall be deemed to affect the

validity of international engagements such as treaties of arbitration or regional understandings like the Monroe Doctrine for securing the maintenance of peace".⁴

Article 52 and 53 of the charter of the United Nations provides some rules for regionalism. According to Article 43, "The Security Council shall, where appropriate, utilize such regional arrangements or agencies for enforcement action under its authority". Certain safeguards are contained in these and other articles in an effort to prevent regional arrangements. Any action under regional agreement must conform to the aims and policies of the charter of the United Nations.

The United Nations lacks the centralized legislative, adjudicative and enforcement mechanism that a sovereign state enjoys. International organisations provide base for resolving international disputes but role of super-powers always represent their own power politics.

When dispute arises among two or more states on regional basis that cannot be handled through United Nations or international law, then states often agree to create regional organisation to study and deal with a dispute. The states often find it more convenient and beneficial to set up an organisation at regional level to solve mutual problems, then to rely on international organisations because social, economic and political interdependence has greatly increased. The increasing importance of regional organisations in different aspects of contemporary international politics has had a profound effect on the making of foreign policy.

Regionalism is demonstration of a desire to share the responsibility for meeting the problems of peace and security by states as a group. Certainly, regionalism as a process of consolidation integrates various units within itself and may be able to supplement a universal system in various ways.

The motivating element behind a regional system is the spirit of community interest, which should be preserved.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Regional Organisations have arisen since World War - II. "They are designed to meet variety of needs, self-help and mutual aid, cultural requirements, economic and social aspirations, promotion of law and order and political ambitions".⁵

More than two-third of the inter-governmental organisations set up over the past century are regional in scope. If we examine the concept of regionalism through history then we cannot ignore the oldest regional group of Organisation of American States (OAS). Not only OAS is oldest but it is also the pioneer organisation in the post-war trend to organize security on regional basis. Before 1933 the idea of regional security was unknown. Since under the Monroe Doctrine, the United States assumed responsibility for defence of the Western hemisphere. Therefore, Franklin D. Roosevelt's good-neighbour policy of non-intervention cleared the way for a system of regional cooperation and security. Regional organisations can be conveniently divided into three major types.

1. The first type is regional defence organizations such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Warsaw Pact.

2. The second type comprises economic and social cooperative organisations, for example Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), European Economic Community (EEC) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

3. "The third type hybrid organization contain elements of political, economic and occasionally military and cultural cooperation".⁶

Hybrid type of regional organizations comprises for general purposes, such as Organization of American States (OAS), Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Arab League. But my concern is mainly with SAARC.

SAARC

South Asia may be called the heart of the so-called under-developed world and pivotal area in contemporary international relations. It is an area of great geopolitical significance and strategically, this is one of the world's, most sensitive area.

South Asia comprises almost a billion people i.e. one-fifth of the world's population. It represents three major religious communities -- Muslims, Hindus and Budhists. Another feature which distinguishes these seven states (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives) is the fact that prior to gaining freedom they were all ruled by a single colonial power, the

British, and have inherited similar problems such as poverty, hunger, population, illiteracy, slow economic growth rates, unemployment and all round backwardness. The home of ancient civilization and new nations, South Asia throughout the centuries, has had a remarkable degree of geographic and cultural unity and its peoples have shared common historical experience for centuries.

South Asia is probably one of those geographical areas which has resisted any form of regional cooperation over the last thirty years. "The region has the singular misfortune of being the only area to be without any form of regional cooperation which could help to moderate frictions arising out of short term economic interests and encourage trade, industrial and technological ties among the seven countries".⁷

Seven countries of the South Asia region have taken preliminary measures to set up a regional grouping with the aim to promote amongst themselves cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and scientific fields.

"The objective of the participating countries is to adopt the functional approach to bringing about a just and lasting peace to this volatile part of the world".⁸

The concept of regional cooperation was initiated by Bangladesh. In 1979, late President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh mooted the idea of South Asian Regional Cooperation (SAARC). SAARC Summit idea was also first floated by him in May 1980, when he addressed personal letters to the heads of Governments of India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives to explore the

possibilities of establishing regional cooperation. They held meetings at official level to give it a shape.

Bangladesh Government prepared a working paper on SAARC which was circulated to the countries of the region in November 1980. It expressed the hope that the common history, language, culture and ethnicity of the South Asian Region Countries would help them to adopt a regional approach, which would advance their economic interests and enable them to gain an effective collective voice at international forums.

The Working Paper identified eleven potential areas of cooperation in the economic, cultural and scientific sphere among the South Asian countries. These were; telecommunications, meteorology, transport, shipping, tourism, agricultural research, joint ventures market promotion, scientific, technical, educational and cultural cooperation. The working paper advocated a "step by step" approach to regional development.

Preliminary meetings were held in Columbo (1981), Islamabad (1982), Dhaka (1983) and Thimpu (1985). The SAARC was formally launched in August 1983. These meetings of secretarial and ministerial level had prepared the ground for regional cooperation, defined its objectives and identified possible areas of cooperation. The name of the organisation was proposed to be changed to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) after its formal launching by the Summit.

FIRST SUMMIT CONFERENCE

The first summit conference of SAARC held at

Dhaka on December 7 and 8 of 1985 proved a great historic gathering of the seven South Asian countries. With the formation of SAARC at Dhaka regional cooperation among South Asian Nations has been institutionalised. It was attended by President Hussain Mohammad Ershad of Bangladesh, King Jigme Singye Wanchuk of Bhutan, President General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, Prime Minister Rajive Gandhi of India, President M.A. Gayoom of Maldives, Monarch King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev of Nepal and President J.R. Jayawardene of Sri Lanka. The summit announced the setting up of the SAARC and adopted its charter.

The charter provided institutional framework, principles and objectives of the regional cooperation. Another important decision of the Dhaka Summit was the acceptance of the need for a permanent Secretariat for the organisation. The Foreign Ministers of the seven countries were charged with the task of proposing its location as well as the organizational frame work. It was agreed that the summit level meeting of the Association will be held annually.

SAARC had been described by President Zia-ul-Haq as a political necessity of the region, primarily with a view to maintain peace in this important and strategic region to improve economic and trade relations among regional states and to pool their resources together for the uplift of the masses to remove their backwardness. President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq summed up the situation saying that the "Documents that we have signed are a major landmark in the history of regional cooperation in South Asia. They constitute a tangible manifestation of

our joint resolve to improve the future of our peoples. The charter signed by us sets out the objective principles and the manner in which we shall strive to ameliorate the social and economic conditions in our countries".⁹

The Dhaka summit of the regional leaders also provided a good opportunity to them to hold informal discussions pertaining to relations among themselves. Bilateral issues of importance were also reviewed during the talks.

DECLARATION OF DHAKA SUMMIT AND CHARTER OF SAARC

SAARC formation was completed with the adoption of its charter, so the idea of President Zia-ur-Rehman came into reality on 8th December, 1985. Basic characteristics of Dhaka Declaration the charter adopted on 8th December were that the heads of states of the seven countries realised that SAARC could play an important role for maintaining regional peace while expressing deep concern at the continuing crisis in the international economy.

They have also decided to consider ways of dealing with terrorism and drug trafficking. Members of the Association signed a joint declaration affirming their desire in achieving the cooperative objectives towards which they have made scant progress over the past five years; Postal Services, Telecommunications, science and technology, health and population planning, rural development, sports, arts, culture, promotion of national and collective self-reliance, progress and stability in South Asia. The objectives set for SAARC in its charter com-

posed of ten articles. These articles examine different aspects of the organisation. Seven participants of the region emphasized the promotion of peace, stability, amity and progress in the region. Through strict adherence to the principles of United Nations charter and non-alignment particularly respect for the principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, national independence, avoiding use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of all disputes.

THE SECOND SAARC SUMMIT

The second SAARC Summit of the seven South Asian Nations held in Bangalore on 16th November, 1986. The summit has given a new boost to regional cooperation and adopted "Bangalore Declaration". One of the most important decisions was to set up a permanent SAARC Secretariat at Kathmandu (Nepal) to provide the association with an institutional framework of its own.

The heads of Governments and states also considered several new ideas for cooperation. The new areas include launching of a South Asian broadcasting programme, expansion of tourist facilities, establishment of SAARC documentation centre to ensure greater facilities for students, scholars, researchers and institution of SAARC Scholarships. Two technical committees were also set up, one on the welfare of women and the other on the prevention of illicit drug trafficking.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

South Asian Association for Regional Coopera-

tion has come into being as a manifestation of the collective will of the seven countries of the region to coordinate their attempts for greater prosperity of their people. Its formation in Dhaka Summit is a great leap forward for peace and cooperation in the area. South Asian countries can play a vigorous role in SAARC and in the world, SAARC can improve the economic circumstances and conditions of the countries of the region because they have a similar approach to questions. SAARC has a bright future to serve the needs of one billion people of the region and is capable of ensuring them an improved quality of life with the attainment of its objectives.

The significance of the SAARC have to be highlighted in terms of political, social and economic challenges that it has to confront. In considering the ultimate development of the SAARC it should be noted that it could entail greater responsibility on India's part in participating in a multilateral experiment.

The centre piece of South Asia's political system is the Indo-Pak relationship. In the absence of a satisfactory resolution of conflicts between the two states, mutual distrust and hostility will continue even after the formation of SAARC.

The major hurdles in promoting regional cooperation are following:

1. Indian's undeniable economic and military preponderance vis-a-vis other states in the region.
2. Indian Pro-Russian stance over Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union has occupied the geopolitical security zone of South Asia.

3. Relations between India and its four smaller neighbours (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) have been marked by continuing tension at different times. In case of Pakistan, the hostility has taken the shape of historical dispute over Kashmir since 1947 and several other issues.

Landlocked Nepal is unhappy about hindrance to its trade with the rest of the world. Allocation of Ganges water at Farraka between India and Bangladesh remains a sore point. There has been a natural reaction of self-assertion to this Indian attitude from its neighbours. This has been the root cause of tense bilateral links in South Asia.

In the final analysis, it is clear that the future viability of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation will largely depend in their ability of sorting out their bilateral political differences.

"The hopeful signs for a future of mutual understanding and adjustment have appeared on the South Asian horizon. It is expected that as a result of concerted efforts, progress will be made along positive lines, not only in the specified fields of cooperation under SAARC but it will also be extended to the vital political sphere for a resolution of some of the outstanding regional issues".¹⁰

If we examine the situation of regional peace and security, obviously there are many obstacles in the way of SAARC to capture the momentum to promote po-

litical understanding. India, the largest SAARC member has disputes with all the member countries except the Maldives and Bhutan. It is very necessary to remove causes of misunderstanding and friction and vitiate the political climate in south Asia.

"It is now for their leaders to work in concert and work expeditiously to translate their dream of a happy, prosperous and peaceful future into a living reality. Given sincerity of purpose the task is not difficult".¹¹

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