
SAARC: PRESENT SCENARIO AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Introduction

Among the physically and well defined regions, South Asia has been amongst the few that has been very tardy in reorganising the benefits of a regional system of co-operation. Until recently South Asia saw very little action rewards regionalism, although there has been plenty of articulation about what regional co-operation, can achieve. The reason is simple and well known. The region is confronted with historical animosities, territorial disputes and political diversity. They reflectively knocked out the possibility of true regional harmony for a long time.

South Asia, today, present an immensely interesting, even if at times baffling and irritating scenario. It presents an intriguing paradox, for it is a region of great racial diversity with innumerable cultures, languages, and regions. Yet, as a region it has distinctive and unmistakable identity. SAARC represents more than one-fifth of humanity and have common problems of hunger, poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy and under development. SAARC countries share common history, strong cultural links and significant economic ties.

SAARC Member States: A Brief look

1. Bangladesh:

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country on 16 December 1971. Bangladesh is a unitary, independent and sovereign republic comprising three basic organs: the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. Bangladesh has primarily an agrarian economy. Agriculture is the single largest sector in the economy producing about 30% of the country's GDP and employing around 60% of the total labour force. The country has a considerable number of large, medium and small-sized industries in both the public and private sectors based on both indigenous and imported raw materials.

2. Bhutan:

Bhutan is a monarchy, ruled by the Wangchuck dynasty, which was founded in 1907 by King Ugyen Wangchuck. With over 80% of the people dependent on subsistence farming, the Bhutanese economy is predominantly rural. The country has the potential to generate 30,000 MW of power from its rivers. Besides electricity, Bhutan exports calcium carbide, wood products and cement.

3. India:

India has one of the world's most diverse populations, with most of the major races represented. Today, India has over one billion people. India ranks among the top ten industrial nations of the world and has an increasingly powerful middle class. The Indian economy is potentially very strong with its large industrial output, technological knowledge and extensive reservoir of skilled manpower. Major exports include cotton goods, iron, raw jute and jute products, coffee, electrical goods, leather, handicrafts, diamonds, chemicals and software. The major imports are machinery, petroleum, chemicals, cereals, copper, and zinc. The

majority of Indians (64%) earn their livelihood from the land with agriculture accounting for about 35 % of national income.

India's geographical position makes it a powerful country among South Asian countries. Another reason of India's powerful status is highlighted in the hierarchical power structure of South Asian region. India and Pakistan were the powerful states of South Asian region but the breakup of Pakistan enhanced India's position within the region and made the system more hierarchical in terms of relative levels of power.ⁱ

4. Maldives:

Maldivians comprise a mixed race, unified through sharing a common history, language and religion. The Maldives political system is a unique blend of its history, traditions, Islamic faith and modern democratic principles. The mainstay of the Maldives economy today comprises fisheries and tourism.

5. Nepal:

After 1951, Nepal has exercised multi-party democracy except during the period of about three decades from 1961 to 1990 when a party-less panchayat system existed. But again, following the democratic movement of 1990, Nepal restored a multiparty system with a constitutional monarchy. His Majesty The King is the Head of State and the Prime Minister serves as Head of Government. Constitutionally, there are two houses of parliament namely *Pratinidhi Sabha*. The mainstay of the Nepalese economy is agriculture, which accounts for 41% of the GDP with more than 80% of the people dependent on it.

6. Pakistan:

Pakistan has a federal structure. The Parliament consists of the Lower House (National Assembly) and the Upper House (Senate). The new administration consists of the President, who continues in office, the National Security Council headed by the Chief Executive, and the Cabinet. Governors have been appointed in all the four Provinces. Agriculture and related activities engage 46.1 percent of the workforce and provide 25 percent of GDP.

7. Sri Lanka

The President of Sri Lanka is both the Head of State and Head of Government. The President is directly elected by the people for a term of six years. The supreme legislative body is a unicameral parliament consisting of 225 members elected by a system of proportional representation. A multi-party system prevails and many smaller parties are allied to either the government or the opposition group. The leader of the majority party in the parliament is elected as the Prime Minister.

Ninety percent of the economy of the country at independence depended on the export of the three plantation crops of tea, rubber and coconut.

8. Afghanistan:

Afghanistan joined SAARC organization as its eighth member in 2005, at its 13th Summit held in Dhaka. Although there are many conflicting interpretations of the geographic status of Afghanistan as being part of central, as opposed to South Asia, its long border with Pakistan gives it a natural advantage to have an impact on the political and economic ambience of the South Asian region. Membership of SAARC has ended its search for identity among the West and Central Asian grouping. Moreover, its involvement within the SAARC orbit can lead to its benefits accrued from various ongoing SAARC programmes, like collective anti-terrorism measures for domestic and regional security, economic enhancement under the existing free trade agreement (SAFTA) as well as its chances of better negotiation over a land route to India via Pakistan and a seaport facility with the later. ⁱⁱ

Interdependence of member countries is imminent to the growth of economy and political strategies. Though outwardly cooperation exists the differences among the members tend to arise due to several political upheavals globally as well as regionally.

Areas of cooperation in recent years:

SAARC took several initiatives, concluded various agreements and conventions and set up regional centres in different member countries including the South Asian University (SAU) established in India in 2010. By 2014, it had 11 regional centres, but the fourteenth Summit decided to shut down some of them.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, by 2016, some closed down and some were merged together to bring their number down to five.^{iv} SAARC also set up a food reserve in 1987 and a food bank in 2007 to ensure food security. It strived to create common regional (South Asian) identity symbolising the unity and oneness of the region, by promoting people-to-people contacts through promotion of regional tourism; exchange of students, academics, journalists, artists, and other professional groups and members of civil society organisations; increased involvement of private sector in various SAARC activities, and; creation of regional bodies and forums, known as SAARC Apex Bodies, besides promotion of sports, arts and cultural cooperation.^v In 2004, at the Islamabad Summit, SAARC also adopted a Social Charter for the welfare of women, children, disabled, and youth.^{vi} SAARC made significant progress towards trade liberalisation and economic integration. It concluded agreements on South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993 and South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2004. To further this process, members signed several other agreements such as those on establishment of the SAARC Arbitration Council in 2005; Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters in 2005; Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters in 2005; the establishment of South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO) in 2008; Trade in Services in 2010 and Energy Cooperation (Electricity) in 2014.^{vii} SAARC areas of cooperation also include terrorism, narco-trade and criminal matters.^{viii} It concluded a Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (RCST) in 1987; Additional Protocol to RCST in 2004; Convention on Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances in 1990; and a Convention on Mutual Assistance on Criminal Matters in 2008.

However, SAARC has not been able to put into practice many of its decisions and realise its commitments and promises.^{ix} It can be said that SAARC as a collective body has not brought visible change in the lives of South Asian people.

Eighteenth Summit of SAARC:

The Kathmandu Summit took place after a gap of three years in 2014, largely delayed due to political shifts and turns within Nepal. A 36-point declaration covering a whole gamut of issues ranging from poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, migration, youth and women welfare and combating terror to media, telecom, tourism, governance and blue economy was drafted.

Prime Minister Modi expressed his desire to take every possible step to boost regional integration. Modi referred to India's efforts to build special economic relationships with each of the SAARC member countries, including Pakistan. Announcing India's launching of a SAARC satellite by 2016, Modi held that only through seamless connectivity, regional integration can become a reality and his priority was building infrastructure in the entire SAARC region. Unfortunately, Modi's enthusiasm about strengthening SAARC, seconded by all member-countries except perhaps Pakistan, could not defuse the overall consternation in the forum about the stiffness displayed by both Modi and Nawaz Sharif towards each other during the first day. The images of Modi and Nawaz refusing to even acknowledge each other's presence dominated the TV screens leading to speculation that the 18th Summit would be a victim of India-Pakistan differences.

That Modi held bilateral discussions on the sidelines with leaders of all countries except Pakistan was underlined by the media and projected as an indication that India and Pakistan were drifting away from each other, which might pose a grave challenge to smooth functioning of SAARC in future. The three agreements that were opened up for discussion were (i) SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement for the Regulation of Passenger and Cargo Vehicular Traffic, (ii) SAARC Regional Railway Agreement, and (iii) SAARC Framework Agreement on Energy Cooperation (Electricity).^x

It was widely reported that Pakistan was the only country having its reservations about the agreements on surface transport and communication. The reason for Pakistan's hesitation was that its "internal processes" were not ready for such agreements.

The summit ended with signing of the energy cooperation agreement by the foreign ministers and as present SAARC chair Sushil Koirala indicated, the SAARC leaders agreed to accord approval to the connectivity pacts within three months, which will boost intra-regional trade and people-to-people contact.

Nineteenth Summit of SAARC (Cancelled):

The 19th SAARC summit was scheduled to be held in November 2016. Atmospherics for the cancellation began building up after Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan sent formal official communications to Kathmandu on September 27 almost immediately after India expressed inability to participate in the summit due to "prevailing circumstances" and stepped up diplomatic pressure on Pakistan after the September 18 attack on the military base in Uri. The cancellation of the summit is unprecedented, as four member-states have cited "terrorism" and "imposed violence" while withdrawing from the summit. Following the cancellation, the future of SAARC has become uncertain even as some diplomats advised Pakistan to cooperate.^{xi}

Future of SAARC

Historically, India has been an active member of SAARC, which is seen as a means to better relations with neighbours, one of the primary objectives of Indian foreign policy. In recent times, India's focus seems to be changing. It is now paying more attention to BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) than SAARC — a function of its problems with Pakistan. Pakistan opposes any degree of regional integration under the SAARC framework; it has opposed connectivity initiatives in the SAARC summit and pulled out of the SAARC satellite project. Pakistani intransigence over SAARC issues has frustrated other member states time and again. In addition to that, Pakistan is openly hostile to two of the SAARC member states, i.e. India and Afghanistan. Pakistani inflexibility and opposition to India limits the ability of SAARC to achieve anything worthwhile in the region.

SAARC is caught in a dilemma: without Pakistan, there cannot be any SAARC initiative but, as seen over the years, Pakistan doesn't allow any important SAARC efforts to proceed. Unless Pakistan seriously rethinks its strategy in SAARC, it will be hard to keep India and other states interested in the grouping. Pakistan may also not be interested in SAARC as it looks to receive massive Chinese investments. Without India and Pakistan's active participation, SAARC can neither function nor foster more regional cooperation in South Asia.^{xii}

Conclusion

The euphoria created by SAARC soon dissipated due to a lack of fresh initiative by member states. The smaller states in their characteristic manner were more enthusiastic about the evolution of SAARC, contrary to their inability to examine its overall impact on their national interest. The leaders of SAARAC should have to be aware of the fact that the regional co-operation idea, divorced from political and economic issues and problems, is not likely to gain momentum.

SAARC has failed to work as a multipurpose regional forum for consultation, imposing minimum operational norms for guiding the member-states towards regional cooperation. It has been observed that the perspective on security issues in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives is similar to that of Pakistan- that the major problem for each is their relationship with India rather than with external powers. Pakistan has overcome inferiority complex and successfully cultivated strategic options in recent years. Most regional states were euphoric in SAARC's initiation but lacked calculations on how are they going to be benefited from it. As regional independence implies many obligations other than nationally contrived strategies and defined principles. Further, they should be prepared for sacrificing interests and principles exclusively enjoyed by independent, sovereign nation-states. Left to themselves, most of the region's States lack the capability of managing such affairs as assuming transnational implications. It appears that South Asian rulers are not prepared to take risks for handling such sensitive problems. But firm national decisions are as much relevant to the evolution of SAARC as the collective decisions to be taken by its members. After more than three decades of its establishment, neither South Asian nations have been able to push the process of integration into full swing nor the organisation has become viable to promote harmony and prevent conflict in the region. However not everything with SAARC is gloomy. It may be said that this regional organisation has got enormous potential in the face of challenging 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 nationals of South Asia. It is, therefore time to re-invent South Asian identity through increased citizen activism. The road to be travelled seems to be difficult, but not impossible. But undoubtedly, the process would lead to a better environment for confidence building among the formal elites and would in turn lead to better South Asia. SAARC will have to struggle hard for internal cohesion as members inherit conflicts and mistrust causing periodic disruption. However, disruption may not pave the way for its demise. Yet, the hurdles ahead are more discernible than the possibilities of co-operation.

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