

**Role of SAARC in Conflict Resolution in South Asia**

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Article IX of the Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) enjoins that 'decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity', and excludes 'bilateral and contentious issues', from its deliberations. At the same time the success and credibility of SAARC is directly related to reduction of tensions and solutions of outstanding problems amongst its member states. Therefore, it is important to examine the role that SAARC does play or can hope to play in the resolution of conflicts in the region.

This paper argues that in South Asia, where 'the factors of sovereignty and nationalism combined with historical, political, psychological and strategic reasons and considerations have generated and reinforced interstate disputes and strategic discords in the region[1] regionalism can only be approached through a framework of regional cooperation which is functional in content and gradualist in operation. SAARC exemplifies this strategy, and the security and well being of the nations of the region depend on the extent to which it can contribute to the improvement of inter-state relations in the region.

This paper is divided into four sections Section 1 briefly discusses the importance of regionalism and regional cooperation arrangements in international relations especially since the end of Cold War. Section 2 deals with the question of regional cooperation in South Asia and Section 3 analyses the factors involved in discord and divergences in the region. Section 4 outlines the features of strategy adopted by SAARC and the prospects for conflict resolution in South Asia.

Nation states are sovereign entities but the circumstances of their existence and function necessitates mutual intercourse. Since it has not been possible as yet to develop any world wide institution in the form of a World State substituting the presently available decentralised international system, nation-states have occasionally embarked on a policy of mutual cooperation at less than global scale. The trend towards regionalism indicates that the nation state system which has been the dominant pattern of international relations for the last so many centuries is evolving towards a system in which the regional grouping of states is emerging as more important entities than the independent sovereign states[2]. Regional cooperation has been the characteristic phenomenon of the post-Second World War international relations and the recent developments in the international relations after the end of Cold War has further strengthened and developed regionalism. During this period, nation states have either grouped together in alliances and blocs or they have formed regional groupings to promote mutual economic gains. The United Nations (UN) as well as international functional organisations under the UN and outside have attempted to approach peace and development through the medium of regional organisations and groupings. As such, regionalism of this kind is not inimical to the process of globalisation. There is no necessary contradiction between the two as the Charter of UN in Article 53 and elsewhere not only

legitimises the role of the regional organisations and arrangements but also seeks to provide them with definite goals and objectives[3].

A number of integration arrangements in the developing world began in the 1960's and continue to proliferate[4]. Some of these are Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA) 1960, Central American Common Market (CACM) 1960, Central African Customs and Economic Union (EDEAC) 1966, East African Community (EAC) 1967, Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFTA) which became Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 1973, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) 1975, Latin American Economic System (SELA) 1974. Similarly, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 and it has emerged as one of the most successful regional organisations outside Western Europe. The establishment of the SAARC in 1985 'to strengthen collective self-reliance'[5] can also be seen as an integration effort.

Though regional cooperation and integration efforts have been attempted both in the developed region of the world as well as in the third world, regional organisations in the latter have remained different from their counterparts in the developed world[6]. As Muni & Muni have pointed out: 'politics is the dominant characteristic of social reality and the question of regional stability and political survival eventually dictate the logic and rationale of socio-economic preferences and priorities[7] in the third world. The third world countries are very much sensitive to political issues and it has been difficult to insulate the economical, technological factors from political security issues and this failure has been the other root cause of the collapse of many third world regional cooperation schemes.

Four conditions identified as 'necessary' by Aaron Segal for regionalism in the third world are worth taking note of. These conditions are that the proposed regional cooperative venture: (1) must offer economical benefits to each unit including arrangement on the distribution of benefits; (2) must not threaten existing beneficial relationship or they must be replaced with new ones; (3) must not constrain the process of nation building; (4) must not threaten the basis of support of existing national political units[8].

## II

The relevance of these conditions in South Asia is obvious. These conditions relate not only to the economical aspects of regional cooperation but also touch on the existing political arrangements, and together they hint at the impediments and obstacles, which discourage the development of groupings promoting regional cooperation in South Asia.

The idea of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) initiated by Bangladesh, more than any thing else has economic rationale behind it. It is readily admitted however, that the initiative in this direction was guided no less by political considerations. Even in the case of regional cooperation among developing countries, both the factors of economic cooperation and political consideration seem to play equally significant roles.

There were several factors in the conceptualisation of the scheme of the regional cooperation in South Asia. Developing countries' quest for a New International Economic Order, increasing

emphasis on the regional and inter-regional cooperation among developing countries referred to as South-South Cooperation, growing recession and consequent protectionism leading to restriction on market opportunities of South Asian countries etc., all contributed to the acceptance of the idea of regional cooperation. Though it is admitted that the shared cultural heritage of South Asian countries have tension generating potentials, a SAARC paper compellingly believes that ‘there was no reason why the common heritage should not be converted into a positive factor to bring the countries of South Asia closer[9]. The paper also sees no contradiction between bilateralism and regionalism. According to the Working Paper, ‘some of minor and major irritants in the bilateral relations... (could) either be minimised or completely removed through regional forum’. Instead of taking a grandiose and all comprehensive scheme of regional cooperation the leaders of the seven South Asian states took a pragmatic and minimalist approach. This is very much reflected in the statements made by officials, diplomats and leaders of these states during the build up phase, i.e., from 1977 through 1985[10]. This gradualist and cautious approach stemmed from the fact that the political factors and the existing state of relations among the participating states were such that a jump from the continuing discord through amicable relationship towards fruitful cooperation, even though very much desirable, would not be attainable.

### III

Bilateralism and not multilateralism has been the dominant mode of interaction among the South Asian countries. The Indo-centric nature of South Asia and the power asymmetry between India and the other countries of the region, in fact, runs counter to the desires and momentum of regional cooperation. The roots of conflict in South Asia can be traced to the regional disparities and divergences on the one hand and the Indo-centric nature of all issues on the other hand in the region[11]. India constitutes 72% of the South Asian region, 77% of its population and 76% of its GDP. India is perceived by her neighbours as a bully, given the backdrop of asymmetrical power structure as the focal point of their threat perception[12]. Bilateralism reigns supreme and that is why the Foreign Secretaries of the South Asian countries in the very first meeting at Colombo (April 1981) ‘agreed that regional cooperation was not intended or expected to be a substitute for bilateralism and multilateral cooperation, but could complement both; nor should it be inconsistent with bilateral and multilateral obligation[13]. Regionalism therefore can only develop as a mutually supportive process to the thrust of bilateralism in South Asia as dictated by the realities of the region. The greatest hurdle in the realisation of cooperative regionalism in South Asia is definitely the ‘irreconcilable nationalist egos’ of India and Pakistan, ‘the original creators and inheritors of conflictual dynamics’[14]. Can the process of regionalism as expressed in its institutional forum, the SAARC, cut through the clashing egos of India and Pakistan to create an atmosphere of amity and cooperation? Is it possible to institutionalise dialogue and negotiations as a substitute for threat and use of force in the relations among South Asian countries? What role can SAARC play in the process?

### IV

The political foundations of South Asian regionalism are weak indeed and the nascent experimentation would have floundered if objectives relating to reconciliation of discords and conflicts among the participating countries would have been vested on the SAARC. The gradualist and minimalist approach, which the South Asian countries have decided upon for the SAARC, is

quite pragmatic, and the charter of SAARC amply bears out the incremental and gradualist approach. Some of the manifestation of this approach can be located in the wording and provision of the Charter. For example, aware of the fact that the existing state of bilateral relations among the countries are far from satisfactory, the Charter sought to insulate the progress and development of SAARC from the bilateral and contentious issue, and provided that SAARC forum cannot be used for the discussion and consideration of such issues. Another pertinent aspect could be located in the Charter provision that the decisions in SAARC would be based on consensus. This was obviously to ensure that the nascent regionalism does not flounder on the altar of majoritism causing dissent and dissension. The bilateral and contentious issues in South Asia are part of the high politics. The countries concerned are very sensitive and would not even consider a situation where their 'fundamental interests' are at stake either for the supposed benefits from economic cooperation or because of a majority decision. There are many divisive issues, which can tear up the fragile cooperative efforts under SAARC. For example, consider Kashmir being discussed in the SAARC forum or Bangladesh raising the trade and transit issues between India and Nepal or Sri Lanka using the SAARC forum for its diatribe against India on the LTTE issues or Ayodhya incident being played up by Bangladesh or Pakistan. In such a situation the survival of the Association would itself be difficult to maintain. It is to ensure against such possibilities that the bilateral and contentious issues have been kept out of the purview of the Association. The idea is to ensure that cooperative schemes are given a try independent of the past and contemporary variety of contentions, which keep cropping up from time to time. Strictly speaking, from the perspective of the conception of SAARC, the organisation could be exposed to danger of inactivity but not a crisis in terms of existence. The consensus approach in the context of the present analysis is the most obvious merit of the regionalism attempt in South Asia. However, from the standpoint of performance and progress, this approach represents a weakness of the organisation.

The conceptual framework of SAARC is in accord with the theoretical insights of Functionalism and neo-Functionalism so far as their applicability to the third world situations are concerned[15]. Notwithstanding the constraints, the formation and subsequent progress of SAARC was intended to reflect an understanding that, to begin with, these factors can be sidetracked, then afterwards neutralised and hopefully overcome. There is a reserve of confusions regarding the conflict resolution role of SAARC. There are analysts who tend to regard the SAARC experimentation as doomed to failure because SAARC cannot address the fundamental and conflictual issues of the region. But the merits of the SAARC strategy, functional in content and gradualist in direction, have the potentiality to overcome the present set of impediments. The transition from low politics (welfare economic cooperation etc.) to high politics is fraught with uncertainty but this is the only way to build up, what Karl Deutsche regards important, a 'Security Community'. A security community is the attainment of a situation where the participating units in a regional international society give up the option of armed forces to settle outstanding issues amongst themselves. It could be noted here that since the very inception of SAARC, no matter how intense the hostilities between the member countries have been, conflict situations have not escalated to the level of any armed warfare. Attainment of a security community along the lines of what ASEAN is trying to develop would go a long way to nurture peaceful harmonious co-existence among the SAARC member countries.

It is a fact that SAARC members have shed many of their mutual reservation and skepticism. This can be seen from the rapid and generally smooth expansion of organisational structure as well as

areas of activity. Moreover, informally, SAARC is already providing opportunity for bilateral talks between the member states. Many vital and sensitive bilateral political issues have been discussed with positive outcome during the SAARC meetings. All this attests the importance of SAARC to its member-states and is a necessary input in the understanding of the various support bases that SAARC has, which contributes to its survival and expansion.

As an intergovernmental body SAARC remains vulnerable to domestic political issues, intra-regional bilateral relations and extra-regional influences. In such a situation, it may be difficult for the organisation to take up contentious issues since they might threaten the survival of the organisation itself. In this context we may refer to the views of the Michael Haas who has theorised the 'Asian way' without which the survival and development of Asian regional organisations cannot be understood. The Asian way to peace and cooperation consists of 'eschewing controversial decision making and minimise unnecessary politicisation and thereby to facilitate collective action where common purposes are discovered.' The result is minimum action yet common minimum action underlined by mutuality and collective self-help. This process can be so regarded, because 'cautious consolidation, gradualism and incrementalism' being its most obvious characteristic, it is expected that this process would be able to create a reserve of collective good at the regional level. The concept of collective good in the context of South Asia would involve a situation whereby it will be difficult for any member of the organisation to gain by disassociating itself from SAARC because the element of loss would be greater in comparison to the gain that would ensue from membership of such a collective forum. This is to say that all the seven South Asian states would develop a certain status during the survival and development of SAARC over a period of time and the organisation would expand drawing sustenance from within and of course also from the economic and political support bases which would be created.

## References

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