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From the Editorial Desk

SOUTH ASIAN INTEGRATION: NEED OF THE HOUR

South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. It is an irony, given the tremendous historical, cultural, ethno-religious and linguistic overlaps among the people of different States in the region. One would have assumed that the political elite in all the eight states in South Asia would leverage the existing links and evolve a robust regional economic framework with a view to both widening and deepening economic engagements among them with the larger aim of bringing peace and prosperity to their citizens. However, that has not been the case.

The power elites in these states have emphasised on inter-state differences and used legacy issues to trump efforts aimed at strengthening trade and commercial relationships. At another level, the States have erected protective walls (through para- and non-tariff barriers) to safeguard the interests of their own producers in the domestic market and inhibited free flow of goods and services across the region. There is a clear gap between the norms each of the countries vouchsafe for and the paths they take to boost regional trade and commerce. Evidently, mistrust and a sense of paranoia characterise inter-state relationship, which in turn give rise to maximalist aspirations that militate against the spirit of integration so badly needed for south Asian economic integration. While it is a fact that greater economic engagement has lowered the intensity of political differences in many other regions of the world, in South Asia, it is politics that has trumped economics and made integration a far cry. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been reduced to an ineffective talkshop and all the lofty ideals it has curated over the years through collective brainstorming and hard bargaining have only remained pipe dreams. The South Asian Motor Vehicles Agreement, which was agreed to just before the Kathmandu Summit of November 2014, could not materialise because one country (Pakistan) refused to sign it at the last minute. The 'Regulation of Passenger and Cargo Vehicular Traffic amongst SAARC Member States', and 'SAARC Regional Agreement on Railways' do have the potential to revolutionise economic intercourse among states and boost regional prosperity manifold. Nevertheless, the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) signed in Kathmandu has opened up the space for cooperation to some extent.

Sub-regional initiatives have only been partially successful. There, too, consensus has been hard to negotiate. The BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) initiative has not been able to realise its full potential because of resistance from Bhutan to the sub-regional Motor Vehicle Agreement that has been ratified by the other three countries, because of what many believe: (a) Bhutanese anxiety about threat to its unique and vulnerable ecosystem; and (b) Popular disapproval of entry of Nepalese trucks into Bhutan, which would turn people against the government.

As the largest country in South Asia, India accounts for over 70 per cent of the region's population, economy and investment in defence. It has shown its enthusiasm for improving regional connectivity and integration in recent decades. However, the problematic and complex relationship it has with the second most populous South Asian state, Pakistan, has come in the way of its endeavour to connect the region with other neighbouring regions. Afghanistan has been the hardest hit by Pakistan's intransigence to allow overland transit to other regional countries for trade with this war-ravaged country, and through it, to countries in the Eurasian and Central Asian regions.

At another level, India has a lot to do. Smaller countries in the region could be persuaded to follow its example if it removes para- and non-tariff barriers to trade, relaxes its visa regime, works towards realising its own dream of making South Asia (perhaps minus Pakistan), for all practical purposes, a border-less region like the European Union. Simultaneously, other cross-cutting regional initiatives like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) should also be activated to generate an integrative impulse which nay-saying countries like Pakistan would find difficult to turn away.

As G20 chair, India has a great responsibility to adopt an inclusive approach while shaping the agenda of this premier international forum for international cooperation. Its invocation of the principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* informs its G20 motto, "one earth, one family, one future", which has been duly emphasised by the Indian Prime Minister. India has rightly sought to initiate an inclusive and consultative process to cull out the views of its neighbours and use its G20 Presidency as an opportunity to shape the agenda for future keeping in view the requirements of the global South. This spirit needs to dictate its approach to economic integration of South Asia, with or without Pakistan. ■