



SAARC- A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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Abstract

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on 8th of December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Like other regional or international organisations, SAARC was established for cooperation and coordination amongst its members by way of accelerating economic, political, social, cultural, technological development of the region; strengthening collective self reliance, reducing poverty and unemployment, strengthening cooperation with other developing as well as developed countries and so on. In its early years, the SAARC saw a tremendous success in fulfilment of its objectives and goals. However, in later stage, especially in the last one decade, it has been witnessing a plethora of shortcomings due to lack of resources, lack of political will, bilateral tensions, low frequency of meetings and so on. Hence, it has been in a state of dormancy since long. Resolution of these issues is the need of the hour.

Key Words: Bipolar World, Geostrategic, Summit, Big Brother, Dormancy.

Introduction:

The present world scenario is a dynamic one with emerging nations in the international geopolitical scene. Gone are the days of unipolar or bipolar world order. Today, the balance of power in world politics is to a large extent is multidimensional with the emergence of various nations with geostrategic, economic and political importance. In this changing geopolitical situation, no individual country can survive in isolation. It is the era of globalisation requiring cooperation, coordination, in the fields of trade and commerce, science and technology, defence and so on. This need has brought various nations together to form international or regional organisations. Such an organisation is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Background and Establishment of SAARC:

The initial need for regional cooperation among the South Asian countries was first felt in 1980. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was founded on 8 December, 1985, in Dhaka (Bangladesh). However, before the foundation of SAARC, there were various useful groundwork done by several South Asian States in their meetings in different places (Kathmandu, Islamabad, New Delhi, Male etc.) where it was argued that there was an urgent need for regional cooperation for development of the region. The meetings also explored the possibilities of cooperation in various fields like agriculture, rural development, communication, meteorology, health and population activities. Regarding this, a working paper, prepared by Bangladesh, read “Economic and technical cooperation on regional basis was accepted by all developing countries as a desirable and necessary strategy”. Accordingly, In a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of South Asian countries in Delhi, the ‘Declaration of South Asian Regional Cooperation’ was signed and thus, launched the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC), the predecessor of present South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Later, in the first Summit Meeting of the SAARC in Dhaka (1985), the initial name South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) was abandoned and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation i.e. SAARC was taken in order to specify that it was an association for the promotion of regional cooperation among the South Asian countries. This Summit was attended by all the seven head of states and governments of South Asian countries viz., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. At present the SAARC has eight member countries with Afghanistan (2007) as the newest member. The Headquarters and the Secretariat of the organisation are located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The



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organisation also has observer states viz., Myanmar, Iran, United States of America, Korea, Japan, the European Union, China and Australia.

The Dhaka Summit (1985) also saw the declaration of objectives and principles of the SAARC. The objectives on which it was to be based were development of social, economic, cultural, and technical cooperation among the member countries and the principles of sovereign equality, independence, integrity and non interference were declared as the guiding principles of the organisation.

Why SAARC so Important? :

The South Asian region comprising the SAARC countries is the most densely populated region in the world with 21 percent of the world's population. It shares 3% of world's area with highly fertile agricultural land. There are different commonalities among the member countries of SAARC in relation to tradition, dress, food, culture and political aspects bringing oneness in them. The SAARC countries also have multiple issues common in them. Terrorism, internal conflicts, industrial and technological bottlenecks, low level of GDP, poor socio-economic infrastructure, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, malnutrition etc. are some to mention. Solution of these issues become easier when the SAARC countries get United together.

Is SAARC a Failure in Present Scenario?

The last summit of SAARC countries was held in 2014 and since then there is no any summit till date. One of the causes behind this is the tensions between India and Pakistan. This has raised the question of SAARC's failure or its dormancy. Even though if we take close look into the initial achievements of this organisation, it becomes clear that it was quite active in meeting the aims and objectives enshrined in its Charter.

Economic Cooperation:

The SAARC has been successful in taking trade related initiatives, namely, Free Trade Area (FTA), SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS), South Asia Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA), and South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). These all are to boost trade relations, reduce tariff burden, and promote easy movement of goods and services among the member countries of SAARC.

Educational Cooperation:

SAARC University (India), the South Asian University (SAU) established at the Fourteenth SAARC Summit (New Delhi, 4 April 2007). Degrees and certificates awarded by the SAU are at par with the respective degrees and certificates awarded by the national universities or institutions.

Social and Infrastructure Based Cooperation :

SAARC Development Fund (SDF), as a funding mechanism for social, economic and infrastructure based projects in the SAARC countries, was established at the 16th SAARC Summit held in Thimphu, Bhutan in 2010. SDF is governed by the representatives from the Ministry of Finance of the member nations.

People to People Connection:

Under the ambit of the SAARC, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal have signed a Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA) in 2015 to boost people to people communication in these four SAARC nations. The agreement also improved transport activities in these nations. Under this initiative a cargo vehicle made its first successful trial run (November 1, 2015) from Kolkata to Agartala via Bangladesh and it reduced the distance by a thousand kilometres saving fuel and reducing air pollution.



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Security Cooperation:

SAARC countries are among world's highest contributor to provide security personnels for United Nations peacekeeping missions. The SAARC, in 1987, adopted a Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and updated the same in 2004 by signing an additional protocol. This shows the collective commitment to cleanse the region of terrorist activities and promote regional peace, stability and prosperity.

Covid-19 and SAARC:

During covid-19 pandemic, the SAARC nations showed positive vibes especially, due to the effort of India that a video conference (2020) of the forum members had taken place to discuss about the pandemic condition. India had proposed creation of a Covid-19 Emergency Fund based on voluntary contributions from SAARC member countries. India contributed \$ 10 million to the Fund.

Despite the above achievements in various fronts, there are different associated challenges hindering successful cooperation among the SAARC nations and thereby resulting into its failure and dormancy.

- Bilateral tensions among the SAARC countries – border issues, cross border terrorism etc. especially, between India and Pakistan have been the bone of contention for long. Burning instances are Sukma attack (2018), Uri attack (2016), Baramulla attack (2016), Pulwama attack (2019) etc. by Pak-supported terrorist groups. This is why India, in many occasions, expressed its reluctant behaviour in attending or convening SAARC's meeting. India cancelled the last SAARC summit to be held in Islamabad (2016) after an attack on Indian Army's brigade headquarters in Uri. Same applies to Pakistan as well. For example, SAFTA, BBIN-MVA etc. have not been very successful due Pakistan's non-cooperation. Recently, Pakistan has kept itself out of the SAARC initiative 'South Asian Satellite'
- SAARC countries face shortage of resources or political will for successful completion of undertaken projects in time. For example, the BBIN-MVA, though was ratified by Bangladesh, India and Nepal, Bhutan faced difficulty in getting parliamentary nod for the same.
- Though there are few agreements and initiatives to promote socio-economic relationship, there is hardly any agreement for resolution of bilateral tensions or to promote trust among the member countries.
- India's inclination and close ties with the western countries heightened its status, which, many SAARC members see with suspicion. Also, India amongst the SAARC nations, is far more better in terms of geographical area, GDP, infrastructure, information and communication technology so on and so forth. Hence, they see it as 'Big Brother' and this Big Brotherly attitude of India, as many of the members assume, would be used by India to dominate the region. This is why the SAARC's agreements are often not taken seriously by its members.
- Chinese influence in this region in many ways converting SAARC's success into failure. Many South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) have become party to China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). China also has launched the China-South Asia Emergency Supplies Reserve to devise a common strategy for combating the COVID-19 pandemic through vaccine development and distribution & to create an emergency reserve to combat contingencies caused by climate change. Another Chinese initiative called the Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre has been undertaken to assist the South Asian countries in their economic development, livelihood improvement, and poverty reduction. All these have lured the South Asian countries making SAARC an weak organisation. These have, in many ways, questioned India's strong role in the region.

Why to Revive the SAARC? :

SAARC has huge potential to integrate the South Asian countries both economically, culturally and politically. If these countries are to gain from the 'Global North', they must be united in the international arena. As of now the various international entities try negotiate with the South Asian countries in an isolated environment where the resource-poor nations in the region hardly gains anything. In fact, one of the objectives of the SAARC was to corporate with the international and



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regional organisations with similar aims and purposes. It also stands for cooperation with the other developed countries. However, these objectives get diluted when the SAARC nations are isolated.

Keeping in mind the potentials of the organisation, the countries like China and Myanmar, present observer states, have expressed their feelings to become its full time members. Moreover, Russia and Turkey have applied for getting observer status of the forum.

At present the regional trade in South Asian countries is very low and revival of the SAARC can boost the same.

Last but not the least, India must be very proactive in giving life to the SAARC. India follows Neighbourhood First Policy keeping the South Asian neighbours in centre. The success of India's Act East policy that focuses on integration of the region economically, politically and culturally is highly dependent on the cooperation among the South Asian nations and the SAARC can play a great role in that, especially, in developing the North Eastern states of India. India can also counter the Chinese influence in this region by assimilating the South Asian countries.

Introduction:

SAARC has come a long way since 1980 when the late president Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh first issued a formal call for regional co-operation, envisaging a meeting of heads of the State or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Srilanka. That the imperatives for such a call stemmed from Bangladesh and that it received instant support from the smaller states of South Asia gave rise to speculation in some quarters about the impulse among the smaller states for gaining additional multilateral setting. India's efforts towards regional co-operation and integration are particularly noticeable.

It was during the Indian struggle for freedom that closer collaboration with fellow Asians became one of the basis objectives of Indians. It was as early as 1920, C.R. Das, President of the Indian National Congress, urged Indian participation in an Asian Federation which he regarded as inevitable. The need for Asian Federation was again stressed in the Congress Session of 1926. A resolution this effect was adopted by the organization in 1928.

From the very beginning, India's foreign policy is one of keeping aloof from the big bloc's of nations – rival blocs and being friendly to all countries and not becoming entangled in any alliances, military or others which might drag India into any possible conflict. In one of his speeches Nehru said "We are prepared to associate ourselves with other countries in a friendly way. We are associated today in the United Nations with a great number of countries in the world. Anything else that we might do will naturally have to be something that does not got against one association with United Nations. Alliances usually involve military and other commitments and they are more binding. Other forms of association which do not bind in this manner and which help in bringing together nations for the purpose of consolidation and where necessary of co-operation are therefore for more desirable.

In the light of above discussion, it is clear that India's perception regionalism in Asia has changed with the changing political and economic scenario. Nevertheless, basic approach to regional co-operation is the same India today, as in the early years, is unwilling to go in for regional security arrangements, as they are likely to invite influences of extra-regional powers.

India is, however, prepared to seek regional co-operation for economic development. It has clearly expressed its views at the time of launching of the South Asian Regional co-operation. It took each step very cautiously and moved step by step without showing any over – enthusiasm to the whole concept of regionalism in South Asia, fearing that SAARC might not take the form of political union in the future. Therefore, the bilateral and contentious issues were deliberately excluded and collaboration was made the lynchpin of the regional organization.

India feared that sooner or later SAARC might also meet the same fate. India's foreign policy largely prevents it from these kinds of political and security pacts which invite extra regional powers. Besides, as said above, India's relations with its neighbours have not been very good. So, if India showed any kind of enthusiasm its neighbours, might view it as a



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demonstration of its hegemonistic attitude. Besides, India itself had the apprehensions of ‘ganging up’ by the neighbours against it.

On the other side, India also recognized the economic gains of co-operation. It assured itself that if closer interaction in the non-political fields are consciously fostered, it may prove equally fruitful to regional co-operation. It also felt that for basic economic activities in the region, some kind of mutual co-operation was essential which informally might help the member countries to come closer to each other and solve the interstate disputes. The proposal was confined to economic, scientific, technical and cultural fields. With all this in mind, India accepted the SAARC proposal in principle, maintaining a low profile, since it did not wish itself to be labeled as the one to have stifled the idea. This was the first major experiment of regional co-operation in South Asia, which strongly needed India, being the major partner, so India accepted the proposal with the hope that economic co-operation will help to remove political distrust.

India’s approach to regional co-operation, right from the beginning, has been to promote collective self-reliance, alleviate poverty and backwardness through self help. This implied planning and execution of the projects for which internal resources both financial and technological can be mobilized in sufficient quantity. Right from the beginning, India made efforts for accommodation towards its neighbors and maintained a low profile in the whole in the whole SAARC set up. The institutional framework agreed upon when SAARC was launched in August 1983 could be regarded as the first pragmatic step in the right direction. Right from the very beginning, India’s emphasis on the core economic areas has been linked with the objectives of taking her benefits of the SAARC to the people.

In the inaugural address to SAARC standing committee at New Delhi in February 1984, P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Indian Foreign Minister observed; Among the most important areas which offer possibilities of fruitful co-operation are trade and industrial development, these is considerable scope for the expansion of trade among the countries of the region. There are obvious advantages in increasing our purchases from neighbouring countries and to that extent reducing our dependence on countries outside the region for our essential requirements. The possibilities of co-operation in such sectors, as trade, industry, energy and environment should be explored through technical study. The objective of such study should be to find out a way of tapping the vast potential of the region derived from geographical continuity in the economics of the countries of the region.

The South Asian Region being a poor region and the mere contention that the foreign assistance will help establish economic balance vis – vis India are some of the factors which called for a ready approval by the other countries. As regards India, it has been opposing the concept of linking regional development to availability of foreign funds. India has expressed doubts whether the SAARC could raise capital from the commercial market, when international financial institutions themselves were suffering from a paucity of resources. Further, India considers the proposal as incompatible with the objectives of self-reliance and self-dependency. Besides, India has warned the member countries against the dangers of neo-colonialism, and external pressures, etc. In plea for retaining economic independence of SAARC.

India which was equally concerned over the problem related to terrorism. It took a long term view and drew the attention of member nations of the SAARC to several international conventions. Finally it was only under India’s SAARC Chairmanship that the draft on regional convention for suppression of terrorism was finalized which was later on signed in the Kathmandu summit. Keeping in view the common values rooted in the social, ethnic, cultural and historical traditions of the region, India has all along favoured co-operation not only within the respective governments but among the people as well.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in his speech at the second summit at Bangalore in November 1986, stressed this point again as the first step towards sound co-operation between the member countries. He said, Regional co-operation cannot merely emerge from the fiats of the leaders. It has to grow from contacts between professionals at all levels. It is also through building a network of contacts at all levels among professionals among many disciplines, that we can start giving real content to regional co-operation.



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India is endeavoring to create an atmosphere of mutual trust, free from misperceptions, prejudices and predilections. This is evident from India's assuming low profiles in the SAARC summits, meetings and conferences with a view to assuring a greater say to other South Asian nations in promoting regional co-operation in various fields for mutual benefit.

Thus there are several constraints on SAARC and it is not likely to be all smooth sailing for the association and co-operatives efforts under the forum in the future. In the absence of a common politico-security perception with trade and industry and the like core areas yet to be agreed upon as areas of cooperation with guidelines for keeping bilateral and contentious issues out; with the rule of the unanimity in decision making; with the bogey of 'Big Brother' all the time raised against India, with funding on a voluntary basis and with the possibilities of external attempts at giving the forum a slant, the SAARC cooperative efforts is going to require extraordinary diplomatic skill and political commitments that goes beyond the SAARC framework. Apart from the reaffirmation of the leader's commitment to SAARC objectives, what is more important is the reinforcement they bring to bear by demonstrating the broader concept of peace and stability in the region. The collective interests of the region for their individual compulsions and priorities. On balance, the answer to that question would hold the key to the future of SAARC.

Conclusion:

SAARC has remained sidelined and in a state of dormancy since the last Summit (18th) in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2014. As a regional organisation, the SAARC has much potential to do with the solutions of complex but common challenges of the countries of South Asia provided the organization is very much active in fulfilment of its aims and objectives enshrined in the Charter. The solutions to the issues like natural or man-made disasters, cross border terrorism, poverty, economic backwardness etc. are beyond the capacity of one particular country and thus, needed collective efforts. The bilateral tensions or issues must be either kept out of this organisation or must be resolved amicably so as to keep it active for the larger interest of the region. It is a matter of fact that both India and Pakistan are members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and both of them show positive attitude in it leaving behind their bilateral tensions making the same a success. For example, recently (2023) India has chaired the SCO summit in India where the Pakistani Prime Minister remained present. Again, India has border issues with China, yet both the countries hardly hesitate to take part in SCO's meeting. If the western world, after world war, can come together forgetting all suffering and animosity, then there is no logical ground for India and Pakistan stay isolated due to their bilateral tensions.

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