

SAARC: Its Role and Prospects

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The world today is witnessing changes in terms of global and regional fundamentals. There is no denying the fact that the importance of peace and development through effective regional and global integration has become an important factor of these times.¹ The strength and development of the states today is not measured in terms of military and defense capacity but in terms of how a state is able to promote trade relations, investments and economic integration within the region and globally as well.²

We see the impact of this importance of regionalism in South Asian in the emergence of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). Wealth of human and material resources coupled with other common features like geographical proximity, historical backgrounds, commonality of social and political norms of development led towards the formation of South Asian grouping known as SAARC. It is important to know that the main idea behind SAARC formation was the promotion of political, economic and social interaction, common vision for using region's potential and interdependence to counter threats. Though unsuccessful in some fields, the overall assessment of SAARC performance shows not very negative trends but emphasizes the need to collaborate further by resolving all outstanding disputes among the member countries and to create understanding on stable basis.

SAARC is an organization of South Asian nations, established on December 8, 1985. Its headquarter is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The very first proposal for establishing a framework for regional integration in South Asia was made by the late president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, on May 2, 1980. Prior to this, the idea of South Asian integration was discussed in at least three conferences: the Asian

Relations Conference in New Delhi in April 1947, the Baguio Conference in the Philippines in May 1950, and the Colombo Powers Conference in April 1954.³

The governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka formally adopted its charter providing for the promotion of social, economic and cultural development within the South Asian region and also for friendship and cooperation with other developing countries. In seven founding members were Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh while Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Observer states include USA, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar, Mauritius, Iran and European Union. Meetings of heads of state are usually held on annual basis and meetings of foreign secretaries twice a year.

Role of SAARC

SAARC has made tremendous improvement owing to the interaction and cooperative efforts being put in by the member states. The progress and development of SAARC during the recent years can be analyzed under the following points:

Substantial increase in Cooperation

Since the formation of SAARC in 1985, the level of cooperation among the member countries increased substantially. SAARC was established with the objective of improving the living standards of the people, cultural and regional economic growth and increasing cooperation with other regions of the world.⁴ During the recent years, realizing the importance of regional cooperation and development, SAARC members have now created a sense of accelerating regional economic development and they advocate revival of the organization by moving from just the issuance of declarations to practical implementation of the plans and policies to turn this weak region into a potentially developed one. This recognition has led towards increasing the pace of cooperation among member countries. The cooperation can be witnessed in the establishment and initiation of various programs and forums for mutual benefits such as South Asian University, New Delhi, SAARC International College, Bangladesh, Agreement on Judicial cooperation on Counter-Terrorism, Establishment of Food Bank, Establishment of Development Funds, Telemedicine Network, SAARC Writers and

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Literature Foundation, South Asia Foundation. There have been some related centers which includes South Asia Cooperative Environment programme, South Asia Centre for Policy Studies, South Asia Women's Centre, South Asia Olympic Council etc.

Economic and Trade Discussions

Economic and trade cooperation is very much important for the success of SAARC countries. During 1990s, among the member countries SAARC discussed the Preferential Trading Area which was materialized in the shape of Free Trade Agreement which is now known as South Asian Free Trade Area. According to this agreement, the tariff reduction plan was chalked out and since 2006, this reduction has been carried out in two phases i.e. India and Pakistan pledged to put tariffs on all the goods down to 20 per cent within two years and all other countries to 30 per cent within three years.⁵ While in the second phase, India and Pakistan decided to put the tariffs on goods down to 0-5 per cent within five years and other members of the organization within seven years. Though the initiatives taken to trade freely in the region has encountered a lot of problem but still we can not ignore that the member countries are proceeding ahead with their plans to improve the regional growth and cooperation.⁶

Increase in External Support

It is worth mentioning that being a poor region, SAARC countries can not develop each and every aspect of their economies alone. They are in need of support and assistance in capital, resources, education and technology from the more developed regions and individual countries. One of the positive points in the recent years has been the interest of the other developed countries in SAARC who want to provide help in social and economic fields. The member countries have reached the conclusion during the recent years that they would welcome any assistance from the observer countries and being observers such as USA, Japan, China, South Korea, Iran and EU are willing to provide support e.g Japan has clearly offered in social infrastructure development and disaster management, China has offered donation to South Asian development Fund and the recent support has also come from China to run the China-South Asia Business Forum.⁷ SAARC has established institutionalized arrangements for cooperation with a number

of other regional groupings and international and regional organizations. SAARC has also been in the process of making agreements and MOUs with other regional and international organizations like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), United Nations Conference on Trade and development (UNCTAD), United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT), United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF). This external support gives a boost to the aims and objective of SAARC to move forward for the better future in the social and economic fields and it is also a good opportunity for the members to develop inter-state cooperation within South Asia.

Social Cohesion among Member Countries

One of the most significant objectives of SAARC is to increase people to people contacts. Though in the presence of large scale institutional set up, it is quite difficult to create an environment for open social interaction but during the recent years, the member countries have realized the importance of this aspect of cooperation and as a result of this thinking, SAARC has tried to undertake a program of well-connected South Asia and that can be possible when people are closed together for which some initiatives have been taken such as SAARC chairs, Fellowship and Scholarship Schemes, SAARC Youth Volunteer Programme, SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange Programme, South Asian Festivals, Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians, SAARC Law, Cooperation of Non-Government Organizations, SAARC Chamber of Commerce and industry, SAARC Scheme for Promotion of Organized Tourism, SAARC Documentation Centre, etc.

Moreover, the civil societies in the member countries of SAARC are also trying to create more communication network's between scholars, writers, journalists, academicians, retired civil and military officials. The success of Track II diplomacy between India and Pakistan is also one of the aspects influenced by this broad objective of regional development. According to Former Indian Prime Minister I. K. Gujral "I have the increasing feeling that un-official SAARC is going to be the driving force behind the official SAARC. This is some sort of 'New Regionalism' which is engulfing the entire South Asian region".⁸ SAARC has enormously developed people connectivity with South Asia.

Cooperation on Security and Terrorism

The SAARC Convention on suppression of Terrorism was signed in 1987 and later the Additional Protocol on Terrorism was signed taking into account the terrorist financing structure. This was in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1373. The Additional Protocol on Terrorism was adopted in 2005 after much debate and discussion on the definition of terrorism. In spite of these two important documents on terrorism, there has not been much enthusiasm to cooperate on issues of terrorist violence and funding between the member countries. Cooperation has been confined to bilateral initiatives⁹ SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring desk (STOMD), Colombo, Sri Lanka SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk (SDOMD), Colombo, Sri Lanka

Focus on Youth

It is a fact that in most of the developing countries, youth is ignored. Although youth forms an important part of development for any nation but still they are not consulted to while taking important policy decisions. Given the sensible bracket of age within which young people fall, they are highly risk taking and in case of no opportunities for progress, they even become the cause of governments fall. SAARC members have all an increasing rate of the young population and they must be made the center of attention which SAARC has considered upon.

The SAARC Youth Award is awarded to outstanding individuals from the SAARC region. The award is notable due to the recognition it gives to the Award winner in the SAARC region. The award is based on specific themes which apply to each year. The award recognizes and promotes the commitment and talent of the youth who give back to the world at large through various initiatives such as Inventions, Protection of the Environment and Disaster relief.¹⁰

Poverty Eradication

As one of the poorest region of the world, it is one of the most important priorities of SAARC to give attention to this main objective of poverty alleviation. The total population of SAARC eight members is over 1.6 billion and 40 per cent of this population is living below poverty line. The illiteracy rate is about or even more than 50 per cent. The task is not very easy but with conviction for stable regional cooperation, this aim can be achieved.¹¹

The seventeen SAARC Summit in 2011 accorded the highest priority to the alleviation of poverty in South Asia and decided to strengthen the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) which was established in 1991 consisting of eminent persons from member states to conduct and in-depth study of the diverse experiences of member states. The strategies for poverty alleviation were suggested such as Social mobilization, Access to education, safe drinking water, Health services, Nutrition, Policy of agricultural development, Labour-intensive industrialization, Human resource development, etc.

Integrated Programme of Action (IPA)

The IPA is an important programme of the SAARC process and includes 12 areas of cooperation, each being covered by a designated Technical Committee. The Secretary-General reports of the Standing Committee on the progress in the enforcement of IPA. The Standing Committee also reviews the institutional mechanisms and the functioning of the Technical Committee, their mandate and also evaluating the role of Secretariat. The various committee working under IPA are such as Agricultural Technical Committee, Communications, Education, Culture and Sports, Environment, Health, Population Activities and Child welfare, Meteorology, Prevention of Drug Trafficking and Drug abuse, Rural Development, Science and Technology, Tourism, Transport, Women Development, etc.

Prospects of SAARC

Although the formation of SAARC is a landmark step taken by the leaders of the region, the main rationale behind its establishment is to develop a conducive environment where all nations may interact peacefully with each other, cultivate sustainable peace and promote mutual economic well-being by utilizing available resources in the region through the peaceful process of economic cooperation. Nevertheless, 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 organization itself has become viable enough to promote harmony and economic integration for preventing conflicts in the region. Everything with SAARC is not gloomy. Infact, the establishment of this important organization is the proof that the regional neighbors want to achieve

progress and, infact, under the IPA, the member countries have been cooperating in various social, economic and security fields.

We can be optimistic about the future of SAARC because both India and Pakistan are now on the way to move ahead with peace initiatives. We can hope better that this regional organization has got enormous potential in the face of changing trends. The people of South Asia can not 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 nations of South Asia. It is, therefore, time to re-invent the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizen activism, which will lead to a better environment for confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia and in turn lead to a better South Asia.

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