



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Regional Co-operation among SAARC States: Hindrances and Recommendations**

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**ABSTRACT**

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South Asia takes up a significant place in the global political scenario of today – being a turbulent region with a commonly shared cultural backdrop and a shared common political experience. It is one of the most complicated regions of the world with its multi-cultural, multi-ethnic communities and social divisions along with linguistic, regional, communal, political, religious and sectarian lines. These elements contribute an important role in creating differences and uniting the region in the same breath. One can therefore say that the ethnic or communal dimension of South Asian conflicts is well known. In the 21st century, the world saw the potential for state involvement as meetings, partnerships, and places, which changed the old definition of a sovereign state connecting to its limits. South Asia has the tremendous potential to cooperate economically, financially, socially, and energy-led. Still, the whole concept of involvement overshadows the numerous internal and external security problems in all accounts. Collaboration and protection inseparably linked in South Asian states, and neglecting to construct both would lead to the network's inability to take any possible action in the region. This paper investigates the riddle of the obstacle to any thought able course of action on availability by Pakistan and India's security elements. The historico-descriptive method of research is being used in this research paper.

**Introduction**

SAARC came into being on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, 1985 in the wake of India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka deciding to form a coalition for stability and sustainability in the region. Afghanistan became an

official member of SAARC in 2007. SAARC is officially constituted upon a set of eight countries belonging to the South Asian region. The consciousness of the Association was placed on the reality of an increasingly interdependent world and the importance of the social peace, liberty, justice and economic stability in it. These goals as per the association's manifesto can be best achieved in the South Asian region by developing a good mutual understanding, reliable neighbor to neighbor relations and a fruitful cooperation among the members of the association. India and Pakistan are recognized to be ancient rivals and have power struggle in South Asian politics (Hussain, 1996).

### **Reason for Being (SAARC)**

#### **Collective Objectives**

SAARC's body is placed upon a strong foundation of a rigid set of objectives. All the decisions SAARC takes and every policy that it formulates, lies within the bounds of these objectives, which form an important part of its charter. Although initially the promotion of '*welfare economics*' and '*collective self-reliance*' among the member nations of SAARC was the most propagated objective of all, yet its focus was divided amongst other equally important areas that deserve a mention.

'Accelerating economic growth' and 'cultural development' in South Asia is one of those areas of much needed importance, the work on which comes under the effort towards a large scale goal of bettering the quality of life in the region. This is the reason why it has recently gained the place of an important area of focus for the associate.

The provision of every individual with the "*chance to breathe in dignity and to come to terms with their full potentials*" also holds a worthy place in the list of the association's objectives. "*Understanding, acknowledgement and appreciation of each other's problems*" is one of the objectives that stands unique to the association's charter and is rarely found in general regional groupings. SAARC also aims at establishing collaboration in the fields of arts, economics, culture, technological development and scientific progress. The member countries of the association are focused at to strengthening "cooperation among themselves on the international forums regarding matters that are of common interests" (Das & Bhutta, 2015).

#### **Evolution of SAARC**

The number of members in SAARC has increased from seven to eight, in the two decades that have followed up since its founding at the hands of the then President of Bangladesh, General Zia-ur-Rahman. It is also for the first time that such a member has joined hands with the association that shares no common border with India -- Afghanistan. Also for the first time since its creation the SAARC summit was attended by China, Japan, US, South Korea and the European

Union as observers. It is only rational to hope that in the very near future Russia too will be added to this list (Shah & Faiz, 2015).

### **SAARC and National Identity**

Unfortunately not a very clear revolutionary change has not been witnessed in the dynamics of South Asia. There is a significant evidence to believe that primary hindrance in development of the national identity among SAARC states are the religion-based nationalism exercises dominantly being practiced in most of the countries of in the region rather than the exercise of a nationalism-based identity (Baral, 1999).

### **SAARC and Power Dynamics (With respect to key players like India in the region)**

In the light of the fact that in the past SAARC was jeopardized with tensions from the cold war and the attempts by some member states to exploit the differences between India and China and India and the USA. It can be said that its future might be better than what has gone by. The recent transformation in the US policy dimensions and the outlook of Washington regarding the need to have a stable power in Asia and consequently the want to better the Indo-US relations have had significant impacts on the region.

Time and again India in specific and the South Asian region in general is labelled as one of the six major power balancers in the upcoming international system. The region presently has a safe strategic partnership with Russia along with the US and the European Union. A strategic dialogue with China and Japan is also underway. The visits of Premier Wen Jia Bao of China, the Russian president Putin, the Japanese prime Junichiro Minister Koizumi Japan and the US president to India along with the Chinese invitation to attend the G-8 summit regarding the development of industrial powers has allowed to revolutionize the situation in the SAARC region towards better cooperation.

Though it is irrational to expect any quick significant changes in the outlook of the states in the region towards SAARC there is still hope that a nascent era of accelerated integration and corporation is on its way because the global forces are emerging towards an international balance of power.

Decisions made in the Association are asserted on the grounds of unanimity. Reciprocal and petulant issues are avoided from the considerations of SAARC (Solarin & Dahalan, 2014).

### **The Summits**

Summits, which are the most elevated events in SAARC, are to be held yearly. The nation facilitating the Summit holds the Chair of the Association.

Pakistan, which facilitated the Nineteenth Summit in Islamabad in November 2016, is the present Chair of the Association. 6 Out of all the countries only Nepal has not hauled out of SAARC Summit because of the fact that the present chairperson is from Nepal and hence it cannot pull out of the summit.

### **The Council of Ministers**

Twice a year the Council of Ministers presided by the Foreign Ministers of every state meet, in order to formulate policies, review the progress of regional cooperation and to identify newer and unique areas of cooperation, along with the establishment of better mechanisms that might prove to be of significant importance to the goals of the Association.

### **The Standing Committee**

The Standing Committee of SAARC is constituted upon a team of Foreign Secretaries who monitor, preside and coordinate the programs and processes of SAARC. They are also responsible for approving projects and also looking over their financing aiding and making sure that all the required regional and external resources are being mobilized properly. The standing committee meets as per the need and is expected to report the action to the Council of Ministers. Till now the Standing Committee has held around Thirty-six routine sessions and five sessions of Special calling. It also conjures meetings on Ministerial level from time to time in order to concentrate attention upon certain important areas of collective interest.

All these proceedings have now become an important assimilated part of SAARC's processing.

### **The Committee on Economic Cooperation**

The Committee on Economic Cooperation (CEC) of SAARC is constituted upon a team of secretaries of the ministries of Commerce and Trade of the Member States. It is made responsible for overseeing coordination and working in the economic field. Up until now CEC has managed to hold fourteen meetings.

As envisioned by the Finance Ministers at SAARC, an Intergovernmental Expert Group dealing with economic setbacks is under work, trying to develop a framework for achieving a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in an organized and gradual way.

### **The SAARC Charter**

The official Declaration of SAARC also ensured the signing of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Charter to be formally and officially signed by all the member states. The Charter contains within it the following principles

- The promotion of peace, stability, harmony, and development in the South Asian region by the way of rigid obedience to the statues of the United Nations Charter and Non Alignment along with particular respect for the postulates of sovereign equality and fraternity, territorial harmony, national freedom, non-use of force and respect for the internal affairs of the other States and peaceful negotiations in case of any disputes.
- The charter is very much clear about the fact that in an increasingly globalized world, the aim of peace, liberty, harmony, social homogeneity, justice and economic progress can only be attained in the South Asian region by developing and nurturing mutual understanding and peaceful and friendly neighbor to neighbor relations along with fruitful cooperation among the Members, under the shade of a commonly shared history and culture.
- The charter is conscious of the collective problems, mutual interests and common ambitions of the people of the South Asian region and hence also about the need for a collective action and enhanced coordination between the states within their own individual political, economic and cultural systems.
- The charter stands convinced that regional harmony and coordination between the countries of South Asia is collectively beneficial and hence should be held desirable and necessary for the promotion of the welfare of the region and for the improvement of the quality of common life in the region.
- It also holds that the financial, social and technical coordination and help among the countries of the South Asian region would prove important to individual national and collective self-stability.
- It recognizes the need for increased cooperation, interstate contacts and mutual exchanges between the countries of the region. It believes that this will majorly contribute to national and international self-reliance.
- The charter remembers and recalls the Declaration embraced by the Foreign Ministers of the SAARC states in New Delhi on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1983 and notes the progress that has been achieved in the region by the way of corporation since then.
- The charter also reaffirms the Association's determination to propagate cooperation not only on inter-state level but also within the institutional framework (Iqbal, 2006).

### **Hindrances**

There are some of the obstacles that have impeded collaboration among the SAARC states in the South Asian region.

### **Indian Act as Regional Hegemon**

India's policies in the wake of the 1971 independence movement in Bangladesh, the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka in 1987, and the attempted military coup

in the Maldives in 1988 are examples of India's supremacy in the region. Even diplomatic statements, such as the Indian government's comments on the deteriorating situation in Balochistan and the Pakistani government's advice to show restraint have also been interpreted as Indian intervention. India has defended its Bangladesh policy on this basis. The Guardian called the "atrocities" of Pakistani soldiers a "heinous crime against humanity and human aspirations." In view of the humanitarian crisis in East Pakistan as well as national security constraints, India sought military assistance, which led to the emergence of Bangladesh. The defense of military intervention by India has been further defended by Sheik Mujeeb-ur-Rehman, citing a similar request. Despite all the justifications for the founding father of Bangladesh, the role that India played in the emergence of Bangladesh is still considered to be in the midst of regional concerns. The most significant consequence of the 1971 crisis on regional perceptions is India's ability to change the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Although the 1971 claim by India may be an extraordinary case, it exists as concrete evidence of India's greater presence in the region. The 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement on India was used to strengthen its military capability in the region. The agreement allowed Indian diplomatic intervention in resolving the conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and its option. It was expected that there would be an emergency clause for military aid, some of which is expected. The precautions and restraint provided by India have done little to address the regional fear psychology that has arisen in response to this incident (Bhasin, 2008).

### **Security Concerns**

The security issues among the SAARC states create a big hindrance in the smooth functioning and cooperation among the states. Pakistan has severe security concerns with India. The border disputes, military show off and Kashmir issue all create a great challenge and security threat between India and Pakistan. Security issues sometimes compel Pakistan not to engage in political ties with India or any type of cooperation. The issue of Ajmal Qasab, Kulbhushan Yadav, incident of Samjotha Express, Pulvama, etc. all put severe threat on the security of the nuclear states and other countries in the region.

### **Nuclear Arms Race**

Another difficulty that hinders collaboration in SAARC is nuclear arm race between India and Pakistan. In 2012, India conducted its first test new Agni V ballistic missile on April 19. Six days later, Pakistan launched its Shaheen IA also tested a ballistic missile.. The recent wave of nuclear-capable missile tests in South Asia has revived long-standing fears that India and Pakistan are embroiled in a nuclear arms race.

## **Terrorism**

South Asia has been facing the menace of terrorism for so long. There are multiple factors that have contributed for the surge in terrorist activities throughout the South Asian region but nationalism, ethno nationalism, and religious fundamentalism have the cardinal factors. The policies of 'otherization', and ideological hatred have led to the spread of terrorism in South Asia. In a realist world, at the state level the marginalization of certain groups in the hands of others has paved the way for terrorism. Any group that does not conform with the predominant ideology often subjects to extremists wrath.

In South Asia live multiple ethnicities and nationalist groups that have been marginalized by the state. Their demands have been curbed or not entertained for a long period of time. This glacial response by the state has led them to retaliate against the state and adopt extreme measures to be listened and noticed. In response to curbing the terrorist activities, the states have adopted the negotiations, peaceful talks, military operations and settlements with these groups.

### **Major Ideological classification of the Terrorist organizations**

All terrorist organizations that are operating in the region have certain ideologies that guided them. Ideologically, the demands of the terrorist organizations can be categorized under three major headings; Nationalism, Religious extremism, and ethno nationalism. Basic understanding of these would be helpful in devising the mechanism to curb them.

#### **Nationalism**

Nationalism has been one of the major motives for the formation of terror groups in South Asia. This could be attributed as the gift of colonization that had established artificial and unnatural boundaries among them. The insurgency in Kashmir is a classic example of the hostility between Pakistan and India. Both countries are in constant warfare against each other. Through proxies these countries have been destabilizing each other. The state-sponsored militant organizations as Harkat ul Mujahideen and Lashkar e Taiba are of great significance in this regard, as they provide subsistence to army and fight for the cause of Kashmir. The operations of these terrorist organizations have been backed by the state and the main purpose is to free Kashmir from the Indian occupation. The terror attacks conducted in Mumbai were by LeT, to register it as an act of resistance. Likewise, the operations of Harkat ul Mujahideen aimed at purifying the state of Afghanistan from the evil occupation of the West.

#### **Religious Extremism**

Religious extremist groups lie at the center of terrorist activities in South Asia. Conservative in nature, the states of South Asia are religious and ideological

in nature. Religion plays central role in the political movements of the states. The Religious fundamentalism in the areas of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan is one of the causes of mounting attacks in the region. In India, the religious zealots belong to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh are of the view that the Muslims must be eradicated from the land of India. Under the supervision of the political elites, these religious fundamentalists carry out their agenda with impunity. The killing of Muslims, the rape of the minorities and subjugation of their nationality are the few glimpse of the religious fundamentalism in the South Asian society. Similarly, the religious extremist groups operating in Pakistan. These groups include Jaish- e- Muhammad, Sipah e Shaba Pakistan, or Tehreek e Nifaaz e Fikah e Jafariya. These groups attacked other sects and they described their actions being motivated for the purification of their land and faith. The attacks on Hazaras, Ismaeli or Sunni have been linked to these terror groups.

### **Ethno Nationalist Separatism**

Most of the world nation states are multi-ethnic and pluralistic. In developed countries, these plural communities mostly live in peace and develop the civic culture in them. But in developing countries as of South Asia, these ethnic groups do not assimilate with the larger community and see it as an instrument of oppression against their culture and resources. These suspicions and the state extractive policies combined to marginalize them and they become vulnerable. The vulnerability compels them to take the extremist path. The demands in these states are on rise, and people have to face disappointments by the governments more often than expected. The classic example of separatist's movements running in South Asia is of Liberation Tigers of Tamil. The group has been extremely violent against the government for its failure to accommodate them in the mainstream. In only few years the group has killed over twenty five thousand people (Johnson, 2005).

In Pakistan, these separatists also operating. In Baluchistan, the banned Baloch liberation army at the support of foreign power destabilizing the province. They register their presence by attacking the government officials, state institutions and the state properties. Likewise, in Pakhtukhwa, the Pashtuns have been claiming to be fighting for Pashtoonistan; a land only for the Pashtuns. The reasons for it are traced to be many including; the persecution by the state agencies under the veil of war on terror.

### **Absence of Trade**

ASEAN provides a great model for trade among the member countries but in SAARC all member countries are reluctant. Only 5% of the total trade of South Asia is intraregional trade, whereas ASEAN have intraregional trade is 25%. Trade between South Asian countries currently totals only 23 billion dollar- well below the estimated value of at least 67 billion dollar. Trade is restricted by a number of factors, including inadequate road, sea, and air transportation.



## **Conclusion**

After 9/11, South Asia became a hotbed of terrorism. All countries in South Asia have problem of terrorism. India blame that Pakistan is involved in all terrorist activities in India and Pakistan have strong stance that how India is involved in activities of terrorism in Pakistan. This should be stopped and both countries should move forward. Year after year at every summit and every declaration the leaders at SAARC have talked about the achievement of goals such as the lowering of poverty, free, easy and mutually beneficial trade and healthy neighbor to neighbor relations. Yet only a little progress has been made until now in this regard. In comparison to the other associations like the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the grouping of Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS) inclusive of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam the progress made by SAARC towards the achievement of its goals are very low. This fact clearly shows that the SAARC body needs to step aside from just formal declarations and the SAARC leaders need to take a practical and serious note of the day by day dropping financial circumstances in the region, starvation and the consequent suffering of the population and take genuine steps to ensure betterment in all these arenas. It is time that the SAARC leaders break the conventional ritual of issuing declarations after declarations and making statements after statements, all of which mostly contain the same crux only with unnecessary variations. This practice of issuing lengthy-collective declarations should be done away with and instead the leaders should waste no time in making efforts to propagate the actual job of Regional Corporation that SAARC has taken upon its shoulders. At the most recent SAARC summit held at Islamabad, the SAARC leaders reinsured and laid stress upon their promised commitment to the Association made back in 2002 at Kathmandu with the vision of establishing a South Asian Economic Union. It is high time that this commitment is translated into practical reality of today.

## **Recommendations**

There are the following recommendations for the improvement of the regional cooperation among the SAARC states.

1. India should stop its hegemonic behavior.
2. Developing a Regional Conflict Resolution Mechanism.
3. Adress the problems of security issues and Terrorism.
4. Equitable Treatment for all the member countries.
5. Trade liberalization for all SAARC countries.
6. Dispute should be settled with dialogue and treaty making.
7. Pakistan and India both should play a key role for the success of SAARC.

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