



# SAARC and beyond

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## Abstract

The paper examines the lack of regionalism in South Asia, despite having many political, economic and ecological commonalities and being home to almost two billion human population of the world. Mutual distrust between the two of major actors of the region, i.e., Pakistan and India, were perhaps the major stumbling blocks. The SAARC process envisioned and carried forward by Bangladesh was the path-breaking in this regard. SAARC has remained dormant for quite a while and critiques are quick to write its obituary. But the relevance and the spirit of SAARC underlined by the spirit of cooperation came in life during the pandemic period when the Indian Premier proposed to address the pandemic crisis under the aegis of SAARC. This was again reiterated by Bangladeshi Prime Minister during the ten-day observance of the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and fifty years

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of Bangladesh. This calls for serious introspection as to how to take SAARC forward as a regional initiative.

For long, South Asia was the only region in the world that did not have any form of institutionalised regional economic collaborative mechanism. This was an irony, given the fact that up to 1947, the Indian Subcontinent was effectively a single geo-political entity, albeit, multi religious and multi-lingual and hence, possessed a degree of cultural diversity. This was all the more strange when one looked at Bangladesh's neighbourhood to the East and the existence of ASEAN, or the post-war Europe and the emergence of the European Union or even the slow but steady growth of the Organization of African Union (OAU), now renamed African Union.

It is perhaps necessary to try and understand why South Asia, home to almost two billion human inhabitants, most of whom were faced with serious socio-economic challenges, had not been able to consider a more collaborative approach to addressing these challenges. Mutual distrust, leading to antagonism and wars, especially between the two of the largest countries, would perhaps top the list that worked as impediments to meeting of the minds among the political masters.

A strong cementing factor in the initial stages of the formation of European Union and, to a large measure, among the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, was a shared security threat perception that characterised the bipolar world driven Cold War following the end of the World War II. Western European countries not only sought collective security through military alliances such as the US-led NATO, it also moved towards economic integration that, by stages, starting with the common market, led to the emergence of the EU. This effectively fortified western Europe economically against their Soviet Union backed communist eastern neighbours. In Southeast Asia, the rise of communist China and the military successes of Soviet backed countries in the region

like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, was an important driving force that helped forge a non-communist politico-economic block as a guarantee against the perceived 'domino theory'. This was the starting point for ASEAN. However, unlike Europe, there was no structured regional military alliance within and among the countries of Southeast Asia.

In South Asia, the scenario was almost diametrically different. There was an absence of any shared security threat perception from external players; however, the threat perception was ingrained within the South Asian region itself, especially among its two largest countries, India and Pakistan. Deep-rooted mutual distrust and discord, leading to periodic wars of varying magnitude, was the order of the day. Creating an enabling environment for any serious discourse on regional socio-economic cooperation seemed like a herculean task, if not an impossible one.

The first sign of reconciliation and overcoming the trauma of wars was perhaps reflected in the language of the tri-patriate agreement signed by Bangladesh-Pakistan-India in New Delhi on 9 April 1974. Although there were only three signatories to this historic document, the political impact of the treaty was felt beyond their boundaries. Other countries in the region heaved a sigh of relief.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the seven South Asian nations that included Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka agreed upon the creation of a trade bloc and to provide a platform for the people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. The process started when President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh addressed official letters to the leaders of the countries of the South Asia, carried by Ministerial Level Special Envoys, presenting compelling arguments and a vision for the future of the region. During his visit to India in December 1977, Zia discussed the issue of regional cooperation with the Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai.

Responding to President Ziaur Rahman's proposal, the officials of the foreign ministries of seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. The Bangladeshi proposal was promptly endorsed by Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. India and Pakistan remained sceptical initially for divergent reasons. The Indian concern was the proposal's reference to the security matters in South Asia and feared that the Bangladesh proposal for a regional organization might provide an opportunity for smaller neighbours to re-nationalise all bilateral issues and to join with each other to form a bloc that would make India uncomfortable. Pakistan, on the other hand, assumed that it might be an Indian strategy to organise other South Asian countries against Pakistan and ensure a regional market for Indian products, thereby, consolidating and further strengthening India's economic dominance in the region.

After a series of diplomatic consultations headed by Bangladesh between representatives of seven countries at the UN headquarters in New York from September 1979 to 1980, it was agreed that Bangladesh would prepare the draft of a working paper for discussion among the foreign secretaries of South Asian countries. The foreign secretaries of seven countries again delegated a Committee of the Whole in Colombo on September 1981, which identified five broad areas for regional cooperation. New areas of cooperation were added in the following years. In 1983, the international conference held in Dhaka by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the foreign ministers of seven countries adopted the Declaration on South Asian Association Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and formally launched the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA), initially in five agreed areas of cooperation namely, Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities.

The first SAARC summit was held in Dhaka on 7–8 December 1985 and was hosted by the President of Bangladesh Hussain Mohammad Ershad. The declaration was signed by King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk, President of Pakistan Zia-ul-Haq, Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, King Birendra Shah

of Nepal, President JR Jayewardene of Sri Lanka and President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives. This was the first such gathering of the Heads of States and Governments of seven South Asian states, something that had looked unthinkable even a decade earlier. At the Summit meeting, the SAARC Charter was launched, signed by the leaders. The Charter was comprehensive in its form and content and basically met the interests and concerns of the member states. It set out the objectives of the body and created the structure needed to achieve them. Two significant elements of the Charter were that bilateral issues will not come within the purview of SAARC and that all decisions will have to be taken on the basis of unanimity. These two clauses ensured that conscientious bilateral issues will not serve as spoilers to continuing and strengthening regional cooperation and that all the members, large and small, effectively wielded veto powers on decision making. The Charter also called for holding annual Summit meetings of the member states. The leaders also agreed to establish a SAARC Secretariat, which was eventually set up in Kathmandu. Afghanistan joined the SAARC as its eighth member in April 2007 after initial reluctance and internal debates.

That SAARC eventually came into being overcoming deep cynicism and all political impediments was an achievement in itself. The delay notwithstanding, SAARC was born with much fanfare. Its birth was received with great enthusiasm by the people of the region, mostly in the relatively smaller but important countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives.

In the initial years, the SAARC process gained momentum with Summits and other Charter bodies holding their meetings on a regular basis. The basket of areas for regional cooperation also expanded slowly, but surely. Bodies officially outside the SAARC but using the SAARC name also began to crop up, although understandably, many were not recognised by the Association. The spirit of SAARC was clearly perceptible across the region, albeit, its tangible impact was a work in progress. As SAARC developed its brand value, countries and international

organizations lined up to seek Observers status in SAARC. The list included the United States, Australia, China, the European Union, Iran, Japan, Mauritius, Myanmar and South Korea. ASEAN also entered into an information exchange relationship with SAARC and the United Nations agreed to allow a SAARC representative to attend the annual UN General Assembly meeting.

A major tangible outcome of SAARC was the signing of the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism at the 3<sup>rd</sup> SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in 1987. The major significance of this Convention lies not only in its substance and form, but more importantly in its timing. It happened years before the deadly terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, commonly called the '9/11 attacks'. The signing of the Convention reflected a visionary realisation among the leaders of the South Asian countries that the scourge of terrorism can best be combatted through an institutionalised cooperative mechanism. The rest of the world woke up to this reality only after '9/11' when the 'War on Terror' was launched by the United States and its allies, with mixed results, at best.

An Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed at the Summit meeting in Islamabad in 2004. The Additional Protocol was aimed at bringing the original Convention in sync with global efforts at fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and align it with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 of 28 September 2001, which, among other things, addressed the issue of preventing and suppressing the financing of terrorist acts by criminalising the provision, acquisition and collection of funds. However, the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks in which at least 174 people died, including 9 attackers, and more than 300 were wounded,<sup>1</sup> brought home the bitter truth that conventions and accords, regional and international, were not enough to combat the scourge of terrorism, much more was needed. That in no way diminishes the fact that SAARC was way ahead of others in addressing this threat collectively. Over the last couple of decades, the ugly head of terrorism has manifested itself in a

whole range of countries in one form or another. In fact, neither the UN, nor anyone for that matter, has yet been able to come up with an agreed definition of terrorism. The US led 'War on Terror' following 9/11 and their military misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq have further complicated matters when it comes to dealing with extremist violence. These wars, in addition to causing huge loss of innocent lives, almost irreparable political damage and economic destruction, have added a completely new dimension to the whole issue of combatting terrorism because of the emergence of new and more lethal extremist groups, armed to the teeth. Their offshoots have graphically manifested themselves in the South Asian region itself, posing new challenges to the member countries, individually and collectively. SAARC, however, remains among the pioneer in at least agreeing to collaborate to deal with this menace. The process now needs further reinforcement if South Asia is to remain relatively safe from this threat. The SAARC Convention provides the necessary architecture for that. What is needed is to make the most effective use of it, there being none other.

The signing of the SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances following the 5<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit in Male in 1990 was also a major exercise in addressing the trade and use of drugs in the region. The creation of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians, a non-Charter body, and the SAARC visa scheme which enabled certain categories of people get a special visa for seamless travelling within the member countries, facilitated greater people to people contact in the region. This gave the whole process greater depth and dimension. The annual SAF Games also played an important role in this process.

Notwithstanding the fact that the process of institutionalised regional cooperation through SAARC was moving forward, albeit, at a pace slower than initially aimed, the history and culture of distrust that has plagued South Asia for long, loomed large over the horizon. This began to take its toll on SAARC, especially with occasional postponement of SAARC Summit

meetings for one reason or the other. The latest casualty of this sad phenomenon is the uncertainty of the holding of the 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, originally scheduled for November 2016 in Islamabad.

It is easy for detractors to diminish SAARC and calling it a 'Talking Shop', among other such cynical terms. The lack of anticipated progress perhaps provides oxygen to such detractors. What they fail to comprehend is that SAARC was born in the prevailing atmosphere of deep distrust and military hostilities between two key members, both of whom were impacted by the Cold War divisions of times and one that lasted well into the late eighties. These facts were not unknown to anyone. It was the perseverance of the smaller members that made SAARC happen and touched the larger populace. SAARC's biggest effect was that Summit meetings provided the welcome opportunity for face to face substantive bilateral meetings between antagonists and non-antagonists alike on the side lines of the main event. At times, the bilateral meetings created as high a soundbite as the Summits themselves, if not higher.

The most graphic demonstration of this is what happened at the 11<sup>th</sup> Summit in Kathmandu. This Summit happened when the political rumblings from the military conflict between Pakistan and India on the peaks of Kargil were still audible enough to raise any sense of optimism. In fact, the event had cast serious doubts on the holding of the Summit itself. Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf had to reach Kathmandu by flying from Islamabad via China to circumvent the restrictions India had put in place barring Pakistani flights over Indian airspace. The very presence of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Pakistani President at the Himalayan capital was enough to draw local, regional and global media and political attention. When President Musharraf publicly extended his "hand of peace" to the Indian Prime Minister at the closing ceremony, the whole hall came down in wild applause. The sense of jubilation, mixed with relief, was all too palpable. As a member of the Bangladesh delegation as the country's Foreign Secretary, the author was privileged to be a live witness to this



piece of history. As an avid SAARC advocate, the author realised first hand that SAARC offered much more than what is confined in its written Charter.

Immediately following this dramatic event, the two leaders held a hurriedly arranged bilateral meeting along with their aides and it was agreed that the military of the two countries would withdraw to agreed locations. A SAARC Summit had effectively facilitated, and an end to a military conflict, at least for a period of time. Important things like this often overlooked when cynics tend to make sweeping criticism of SAARC.

Even before the Kathmandu ‘peace summit’, an event that has relevance to the region was initiated by then, and current, Bangladesh Prime Minister—Sheikh Hasina. Immediately following India, and then Pakistan, joining the nuclear weapons club in 1998, the Bangladesh Prime Minister took the initiative to make whirlwind visits to New Delhi and Islamabad, even though she was not the SAARC Chairperson at that time. The purpose was to suggest to the leaders of the two countries that a nuclear arms race between them has the potential to put the region at grave risk. She did it in the spirit of SAARC even though the issue was beyond SAARC’s formal writ.

The Corona virus pandemic has driven home the point that it is vitally important that to try and contain and combat this threat, a collective and cooperative approach is the best. Such cooperation has to be a combination of global, regional and bilateral efforts. It is this realisation that led SAARC leaders to meet virtually just when the deadly virus had begun to spread its tentacles beyond borders. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal for consultations among the leaders of the SAARC member countries through a video conference to try and collectively meet the threat of COVID-19 was the most thoughtful and a timely initiative. It was also an unprecedented move, both in its form and in content. The prompt response to the proposal from all the SAARC leaders, notwithstanding Pakistan’s slightly delayed nod, was also a reflection of the

degree of seriousness with which South Asia has treated the pandemic.

The video conference of 15 March 2020 was unprecedented because this was the first time that SAARC leaders used the medium of a virtual platform to talk amongst themselves and not wait for a full-scale Summit meeting. Notably, until then South Asia, and by extension, SAARC, was the only regional grouping that had taken such a move. European Union member countries, known for their tradition of mutual consultation and coordination when faced with any serious issue, were still pointing fingers at each other as Europe grappled with the effects of COVID-19 in all spheres of its life. The ASEAN, another regional grouping to our east that has prided itself in being cohesive, has come up seriously short in adopting a coordinated response to the spread of the deadly virus.

All SAARC leaders, except Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, who designated an adviser of the rank of a minister to represent him at the event, participated at the historic video conference. They shared their respective experiences with the coronavirus and suggested possible steps to halt its spread. Why the Pakistani leader chose to stay away was not easily explicable. Frankly, it was a missed opportunity for Imran Khan to interact for the first time, with all other SAARC heads of states and governments, and that too on an issue that is non-political but one that impacts in varying degrees on all countries, not only in South Asia but in the whole world. Importantly, Pakistan is supposed to assume Chairmanship of SAARC as the host of the next Summit whenever it is convened. Prime Minister Imran Khan's presence at the video conference would have been an indication that his government's commitment to move the SAARC process forward and give it a much-needed momentum.

The video conference was significant for yet another reason. Following a spate of terrorist attacks on Indian soil over the last couple of years, India had put on hold all high-level bilateral

dialogues with Pakistan on the argument that, ‘terror and talks cannot go together.’ New Delhi has held on to this stance for long. By calling for this video conference, however, and trying to adopt a coordinated move to deal with the menace of COVID-19, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had signalled his government’s readiness to put bilateral differences aside for the sake of a greater regional good. After all, this is what SAARC is all about. COVID-19 is bigger than any military threats. It respects no frontiers, it is not visible till it hits, it targets anyone in its path and the world is still trying to build a strong and a lasting defence against its potency. At the virtual Summit, it was agreed to set up a COVID-19 emergency fund. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also suggested setting up a SAARC regional medical research centre with special emphasis on addressing the threat from the virus.

The event demonstrated a mature understanding that global challenges require coordinated response. The initiative to prepare for a collective response was lauded by major countries of the world including the US and Russia. Among tangible deliverables, the meeting saw India’s proposal of a COVID-19 emergency fund for SAARC countries to fight the pandemic, extending \$10 million as India’s contribution for the fund. Contributions to the emergency fund have also been committed by Sri Lanka (\$5 million), Bangladesh (\$1.5 million), Nepal (\$1 million), Afghanistan (\$1 million), Maldives (\$200,000) and Bhutan (\$100,000) taking the total amount in the COVID-19 Emergency Fund to \$18.3 million.<sup>2</sup> Since the leaders’ video conference, the senior health professionals of SAARC countries also met on another video conference on 26 March 2020 to exchange experiences of combating the spread of COVID-19 thus far and share best practices. SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC-IU) Gandhinagar set up a website on COVID-19 for shared use<sup>3</sup> of SAARC countries.

One hopes that the video conference of 15 March 2020 could herald in a renewed sense of urgency and a realisation that when faced with a grave challenge such as this, South Asia’s

political leaders are willing to rise above themselves and work together for the good of all. Although the virtual Summit was not officially billed as a SAARC event, the presence of the SAARC Secretary General with the SAARC logo in the background was clear indication that the essence of SAARC loomed large all over it. It would also be safe to assume that the people of South Asia as a whole would have welcomed this move and their faith in SAARC would have been renewed.

In spite of its many shortcomings and all the perceptible trust deficits that has plagued the region for long, the people of South Asia has always looked upon SAARC as a symbol of hope and as the body for institutionalised regional economic collaboration. Its political benefits also cannot be ignored.

### **Beyond SAARC**

In analysing SAARC's more than four decades of passage, albeit, an undulating one, the association's significant achievement lies in two major areas. First, SAARC gave South Asians a regional identity which they could call their own with a measure of pride. Second, it generated a spirit of regional cohesion, one that has endured even in its current enforced dormant state. The decision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to invite SAARC Heads of Government and States to his first inauguration as Prime Minister in 2014 was seen as a visionary move to rekindle that spirit. The unfortunate military skirmishes between Pakistan and India that intervened after that, however, pushed the whole thing back, seemingly irreversibly.

All, however, was not lost. The more recent Bangladesh-Sri Lanka agreement to put into effect a currency swap arrangement is a case in point. Under this agreement, Bangladesh lent an amount up to \$200 million to help the island country's adverse balance of payment situation.<sup>4</sup> The first tranche of this has already been delivered to Colombo.

As the prime mover of the SAARC process, Bangladesh is best placed to take the initiative to get the momentum of SAARC back on track. Perhaps such indications were perceptible during the observance of the twin anniversaries of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the fiftieth year of the emergence of Bangladesh in March 2021. If one were to analyse the entirety of the 10 days of observance of the twin events, one could discern such a thought emanating from the speeches of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The physical and virtual presence of regional leaders and the sound bites coming out of it warrants close study. In addition to giving Bangladesh huge visibility in the regional stage, there were potential larger ramifications, if followed up in the coming months and years. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call 'upon the political leaders and policymakers of South Asia to work hand in hand to build a peaceful and prosperous South Asia' signalled such a possibility. The Prime Minister re-iterated this at the end of the ceremonial programme of the Independence Day itself in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, significantly and unambiguously appealing to all for a 'pledge to forget all the divisions, work for the development of people and establish a prosperous South Asia', calling specifically on India as the largest country in the region to play a leading role in building a stable and politically and economically vibrant South Asia. The not so veiled messages in these statements were not lost to the discerning ears. She was addressing all those who turned up at the historic events and also those who could not. The Prime Minister seems to have taken that a step further by calling for a more inclusive institutionalised regional cooperation, with emphasis on 'forgetting past divisions'. It may not be wrong to presume that the Prime Minister has set a vision for a regional role for Bangladesh as a strong advocate for meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia. SAARC is the perfect platform for this. Prime Minister Modi in his response echoed similar sentiments, albeit, in a more nuanced language.

It has become fashionable in some quarters to write a premature obituary for SAARC. Those that involve themselves in

such an exercise do so but cannot offer any viable alternative. A piecemeal, and at times frantic, effort to come up with something different has not produced the expected result, far from it. It is important to understand that sub-regional, or trans-regional, economic and technical groupings do not run counter to the fundamental goals of SAARC. If anything, they may complement them.

Looking beyond SAARC should mean looking at SAARC itself and the Association's continuity beyond the present. What is needed is the right political will. The emergence of a multi-polar Asia in an unpredictable world has made this all the more relevant.

Since the whole idea of institutionalised regional cooperation among the countries of South Asia was first conceived in Bangladesh, which led to eventual birth of SAARC, Bangladesh could now take the initiative to get the association's momentum back on track. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on all South Asian countries has once again exposed the stark reality that when faced with a serious threat, not necessarily a military one, a cooperative and a collaborative approach becomes the best option. In addition to threats from such phenomenon as global warming, environmental hazards and food and energy security; health security has now become an integral part of the narrative of trans-border cooperation. The task now is to put SAARC, as the existing architecture, into practice.

The process to regenerate SAARC does not necessarily need to begin with a formal Summit meeting. Health experts from the member countries could interact, virtually at first, and then move on from there. Such an exercise does not to be limited to the health sector only. It can progress to the other agreed sectors of cooperation. A political coating can follow when the process has moved sufficiently forward. Abandoning SAARC has not proven to be the right path, embracing it will be.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Blinken Remembers Victims of 26/11 Attack, Says Justice Is Long Overdue”, *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/world/blinken-remembers-victims-of-26-11-attack-says-justice-is-long-overdue/772473/>

<sup>2</sup> Chris Alden and Charles Dunst, *COVID-19: South Asia and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)*,

<https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-relations/centres-and-units/global-south-unit/COVID-19-regional-responses/South-Asia-and-COVID-19>

<sup>3</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Inauguration of SAARC Disaster Management Centre, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28482/Inauguration\\_of\\_SAARC\\_Disaster\\_Management\\_Centre](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28482/Inauguration_of_SAARC_Disaster_Management_Centre)

<sup>4</sup> Sanjay Kathuria, “As Bangladesh Rises, Sri Lanka Finds India is Not the Only Neighbour With Deep Pockets”, *The Wire*, 10 June 2021, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/bangladesh-sri-lanka-south-asia-india-deep-pockets>.