

INDIA'S ROLE IN THE SAARC

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of SAARC in 1985 was a milestone in the institutionalization of regional cooperation in South Asia, a region betraying a glaring paradox; abundant in human and natural resources but mired in poverty as well. SAARC aims at accelerating the process of socio-economic development in member states through “collective self-reliance”. Its creation, therefore, kindled hopes amongst South Asian Peoples for a better future marked by prosperity and freedom from want. SAARC, has, however, failed to live up to such expectations. India, the predominant power in the region, in its commitment to SAARC, has had tried to ensure that the latter deliver the good by focussing on poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, regional economic integration and proper harnessing region's resources, encouraging people-to-people contact and by taking appropriate measures in this regard. India has urged the member states to put aside their rivalries and concentrate their attention energies on regional development delivering win-win results. Despite this, the hostility between two developed regional powers- India and Pakistan –as well as the in-built asymmetry in the Indo-Centric region and the consequent threat perception among smaller countries of the region as frustrated India's sincere but cautious attempts to make SAARC a meaningful and productive regional organisation.

This article examine India's approach to SAARC since its inception manifesting in its perception attitude towards SAARC and its role in and contribution to SAARC. It will also deal with India's initiatives toward creating a better future to SAARC.

NEED OF THE STUDY

South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in December 8, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, for the cause to achieving regional cooperation among the South Asian countries. It is the prototype of other regional arrangements like EU, ASEAN, and APEC etc,. Being the biggest country in the SAARC in terms of size and population India is playing prominent role in it. The present study focussed on India's initiatives towards the formation of SAARC also the study to trace out to strengthen India's contribution for a better future of SAARC.

HYPOTHESIS

1. To study the origin and evolutionary growth of SAARC.
2. To examine the aims and objectives of SAARC.
3. To analyse the India's significance in the SAARC.
4. To traced out the challenges faced by SAARC.

INTRODUCTION

With a combined landmass of 5.12 million square kilometres, a total population exceeding 1.65 billion, more than 60% of whom are below thirty, and an aggregate GDP of over US \$6 trillion in PPP terms, the eight-member SAARC grouping was expected to play a critical role in the new Asian century provided it could overcome problems of poor domestic governance, export of terror by some, of sporadic outbursts of ethnic, communal and sectarian conflicts and unresolved border disputes gifted by the colonial past.

The South Asian region since the independence in 1940s did follow protectionist policies with state controls of economic activity, focus on self-reliance with less dependence on foreign investment through tariff and non-tariff barriers. Sri Lanka led the economic liberalising in 1970s and others adopted the new globalisation route in 1980s and 90s. The process of economic reforms in most countries continues at a varied pace. It was also a prerequisite for achieving a meaningful regional institutionalised mechanism. Hence the seven South Asian nations that included Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka agreed upon the creation of a trade bloc called South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 and to provide a platform for the SAARC Charter whose very first Article enunciated as follows;

We, the Heads of State or Government of BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, INDIA, MALDIVES, NEPAL, PAKISTAN and SRI LANKA;

"Desirous of promoting peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the UNITED NATIONS CHARTER and NON-ALIGNMENT, particularly respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all disputes; people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. "

The SAARC Charter further stipulates that decisions at all SAARC fora are to be taken on the basis of unanimity. Bilateral and contentious issues are explicitly excluded from its deliberations and cooperation is based on sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Ironically these provisions have their own cumbersome tale and have posed effective restraint on SAARC's functioning since they have been observed more in violation than compliance.

Dhaka Declaration of 13th SAARC Summit in November 2005 included Afghanistan in the forum as its 8th newest member. There are currently 9 Observers in SAARC (China, EU, Iran, Republic of Korea, Australia, Japan, Mauritius, Myanmar and US). There is a moratorium on admission of new observers or upgrading observers to dialogue partner status, pending greater clarity on the nature and direction of SAARC's relationships with observers¹.

STRUCTURE OF SAARC

SAARC has comprises the following structure:

1. Principal Organs.

- **Meetings of Heads of State or Government:** Meetings are held at the Summit level, usually on annual basis.
- **Standing Committee of Foreign Secretaries:** The Committee provides overall monitoring and coordination, determines priorities, mobilizes resources and approves project and financing.
- **SAARC Secretariat:** The SAARC Secretariat was established in Kathmandu, Nepal on Jan. 1987. Its role is to coordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities, service the meetings of the association and serve as a channel of communication between SAARC and other international organisations. The Secretariat comprises the secretary-general, seven directors and other general services staff. The secretary-general is appointed by the Council of Ministers on the principle of rotation, for a non-renewable tenure of three years.

2. SAARC Specialized Bodies.

- **SAARC Development Fund(SDF):** Its primary objective is funding of project-based collaboration in social sectors such as poverty alleviation and development etc.,. SDF is governed by a Board consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Finance of the Member States. The Governing Council of SDF oversees the functioning of the Board.
- **South Asian University(SAU):** It is an international university, located in India. Degrees and certificates awarded by the SAU are at par with the respective degrees and certificates awarded by the National Universities/ Institutions.
- **South Asian Regional Standards Organisation(SARSO):** It is located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Its purpose is to achieve and enhance coordination and cooperation among SAARC member states in the field of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed to develop harmonized Standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.
- **SAARC Arbitration Council:** It is an **inter-governmental body** having its office in Pakistan is mandated to provide a legal framework/ forum within the region for fair efficient settlement of commercial, industrial, trade, banking, investment and such other disputes, as may be referred to it by the member states and their people².

SAARC SUMMITS

The members States of SAARC are arranging meetings at Summit level, usually on annual basis for the execution SAARC agenda. The first summit was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 6-8, December 1985. Since then there were Nineteen Summits held at various capitals/ cities of member states. The 19th SAARC Summit was hosted by Pakistan in 2016. India including Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives did not attend in this summit due to 2016 Uri terrorist attack. Pakistan postponed the SAARC summit announced that new dates would be released soon, but it did not happen.

OBJECTIVES OF SAARC

- To promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life.
- To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials.
- To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia.
- To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems.
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
- To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries.
- To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of economic interests; and
- To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

AREAS OF COOPERATION

The motivation behind the formation of SAARC is the member states should cooperate in the following areas:

- Human Resource Development and Tourism
- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Environment, Natural Disasters and Biotechnology
- Economic, trade and Finance
- Social Affairs
- Information and Poverty Alleviation

- Energy, Transport, Science and Technology
- Education, Security and Culture and Others.

INDIA'S CONTRIBUTION IN THE SAARC

Right from the origin and evolutionary growth of SAARC, India has been playing a prominent role in it. Here to assess the India's initiatives in the SAARC are:

- India took sincere effort for the formation of SAARC. It played a big role in the first summit, which was held during the origin of this organization as well as the preparation of its Charter.
- India was hosted to SAARC summits three times. The second summit was held in 1986: Eighth summit was held in 1995: and Fourteenth summit was held in 2007. During the 2nd Summit the Heads of State or Government welcomed the signing of the MOU on the establishment of the SAARC Secretariat by the Council of Ministers and their decision to locate the Secretariat in Kathmandu, Nepal and appoint Abul Ahsan of Bangladesh as the first Secretary-General of SAARC.
- India, given its size, population, economy and central location is indeed the pivot of SAARC. It has common land/sea borders with six of the seven other members which place it in an unquestionable leadership role.
- India because of its geography, economy, international stature and commitment to the region is central to SAARC. The SAARC region has acute asymmetrical power balance as India encompasses more than 75 percent of the region's GDP and more than 70 percent of population, territorial dependency in India is high and it possesses enormous military power compared to other countries in the region. India has a special responsibility flowing from the geography of the region and the size of its economy. Taking the region along in India's march towards progress and prosperity is both an economic and demographic imperative. India has so far contributed over US\$ 530.- million to SAARC institutions for socio-economic development³.

India's trade with South Asia accounts for around 5.5% of its global trade. India have been advocating expedited negotiations/implementation of agreements, promoting investments, trade, exchanges in the region. India's emphasis is on three central themes of SAARC- trade, connectivity and people-to- people contact. They were summarised hereunder:

- Under SAFTA, India has unilaterally offered duty free access on all items to the SAARC LDCs and has met the Phase II commitments for non-LDCs. It has zero tariff for goods coming from LDCs. We are eliminating 455 out of 480 tariff lines in our Sensitive Lists for LDCs.
- India is ready with its schedule of commitment of SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) which was come into force in December 2012. The Agreement provides for expanding intra-regional investments, trade liberalization in the services sector, etc. The 5 Least Developed Countries in the region, viz. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal, are accorded special and differential treatment, commensurate with their developmental need
- The fledgling SAARC Development Fund (SDF) finances sub-regional projects envisaged under its social, economic and infrastructure windows. India is the only country to have paid its assessed contribution(for the entire 5 year period) of US\$ 89.9 million and a a voluntary contribution of US\$ 100 million⁴.
- A currency swap arrangement for the region, with a base fund of US\$ 2 billion from India provides short term foreign exchange liquidity requirements of Member States.
- With the initiation of India the member countries of SAARC have established a Free Trade Area (FTA) which will increase their internal trade and lessen the trade gap of some states considerably.
- India hosts the prestigious South Asian University. It is committed to provide 100% of its capital costs including 100 acres of land for its permanent campus in New Delhi. India provides one hundred fully paid up scholarships at the South Asian University for students from SAARC LDCs. It also

provides post-graduate and doctoral studies scholarships at the Indian Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. Besides, India offers two scholarships to each Member State annually through ICCR under the SAARC Chair, Fellowship and scholarship schemes.

- At the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, India offered to develop and launch a satellite dedicated to SAARC countries. India has called for a Regional Air Services Agreement and offered to help in creating an enabling environment to reduce telecommunications costs to improve connectivity. It is also the prime mover behind the proposed Motor Vehicles Agreement and the Railways Agreement. India is also actively engaged in implementation of the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation which offers a conducive environment to facilitate cross border electricity trade within the SAARC region.
- The first engagement of the Prime Minister with SAARC was at the XVIII Summit in Kathmandu in November, 2014. India made a number of unilateral offers at the Summit, notably, to build a SAARC Satellite, monitor polio-free countries and provide polio and pentavalent vaccines to the children of South Asia, liberalize the regime of business and medical visas, increase intra-regional tourism, promote use of solar energy, increase cross-border physical, digital and knowledge connectivity, share its expertise in disaster management and mitigation etc.
- In the following ways India fulfilment the above said unilateral offers made by India at the XVIII SAARC Summit were (i) India has contributed US\$ 1.05 million for up gradation of the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre laboratory in Kathmandu to a supranational laboratory (ii) A delegation from Afghanistan visited India in November, 2015 to participate in the polio immunization drive and learn from our best practices (iii) India organized the first ever South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx) from 23-26th November, 2015 in New Delhi to provide participants a practical, realistic exercise aiming to address the diverse strategic issues of a multi-national disaster relief operation and coordination (iv) The regime of Indian business and medical visas have been liberalized for SAARC nationals (v) India has set up a Special Purpose Facility(SPF) to finance infrastructure projects in the region that would enhance our connectivity and trade⁵.
- The 12th South Asian Games were held from 6-16th February, 2016 in Guwahati and Shillong, under the auspices of South Asia Olympic Council. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Games.
- India offered to develop and launch a satellite dedicated to SAARC countries. India has also called for a Regional Air Services Agreement and offered to help in creating an enabling environment to reduce telecommunications costs to improve connectivity.
- India was the first country to reach out to Nepal in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. Our emergency assistance drew appreciation from all quarters.

GUJRAL DOCTRINE- INDIA AND SAARC

I.K.Gujral, the then foreign affairs minister in V.P. Singh government advocated a doctrine regarding India's foreign policy. It depicts about a new approach towards countries in the neighbourhood and as the dominant country in South Asia, India needed to be sensitive to the countries of its smaller neighbours and pursue accommodation and conciliation in an effort to promote cordial relations with countries in the region. Gujral Doctrine was more forcefully incorporated into Indian foreign policy during Gujral's Prime Ministership in 1996-98. Under this doctrine he restarted a stalled 1994 dialogue with Pakistan over unresolved issues, signed a landmark water-sharing treaty with Bangladesh and inaugurated talks on the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. With Nepal, he offered to "revise or scrap" the 1950 India Nepal Treaty, which was seen in Kathmandu as a symbol of unequal relations. And also India was

withdrawn her peacekeeping force from Sri Lanka, which had been a source of friction in the bilateral relationship.

India has taken several initiatives to improve bilateral relations with all the member countries without exception. India's historic free trade arrangements with Bhutan and Nepal have been expanded to include a FTA with Sri Lanka and significant liberalisation of market access for Bangladesh's principal exports, namely textiles. India is committed to the economic development of Afghanistan and already has allocated US\$ 2 billion on important infrastructure projects in the energy and highway sectors among others.

OBTACLES TO INDIA'S INITIATIVES IN THE SAARC

The above said India's contribution to the SAARC, no doubt it is the driving force to strengthen the Organisation but India has been facing some obstacles regarding her initiatives in the SAARC. They are:

1. The small neighbour countries of SAARC feel the "Big Brother Syndrome" about India. India's larger size of territory made India the most striking culprit in the eyes of its smaller neighbours in the SAARC.
2. Due to its economic strength, scientific and technological development India is creating in the minds of smaller neighbours' suspicion of domination feeling by India.
3. Pakistan factor is another obstacle to India's initiatives in the SAARC. Though the two countries occupied the largest in numbers in size i.e. 80% of SAARC land area, over 85% of its population and over 90% of its GDP, but Pakistan's uninterrupted enmity disturbed her initiatives in the SAARC. For example India and few SAARC members boycotted 19th SAARC Summit which was held in Islamabad due to the Pakistan's sponsored terrorist attack on Uri army camp in J&K. And ultimately it was scraped.
4. China's intervention in the South Asian countries also one of the obstacles to India's initiatives in SAARC. China has border connectivity with India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. Except India all are Least Developed Countries (LDCs). For this reason China has increasing her influence in these countries by investing billions of dollars and provided loans with subsidy. It will definitely leads to containing India's influence in South Asian region. For example China got contracts for the construction of Hambantota port and the expansion of Colombo port. During the tour of Chinese president in Bangladesh in October 2017, the two governments signed 27 agreements involving \$24.45 billion in assistance and investment for Bangladesh.
5. Another obstacle to India's initiatives in the SAARC is the small members of SAARC like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka considered India is to be the main source of threat to their security, they welcomed either directly or indirectly, the role of extra-regional powers in the region to counter the military might and the alleged military threat of India⁶.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, to overcome the above said obstacles regarding India's initiatives in the SAARC, India should take the following steps:

1. Since India is alleged by the smaller members of SAARC for displaying a big brotherly attitude, it should change its policy and attitude towards its neighbours. In this context India should implement "Gujral Doctrine" more effectively than past. The Doctrine consist the following principles:
 - a) Acknowledging its greater strength and larger size, India will be accommodating and generous towards her neighbours unilaterally to the maximum possible extent without demanding reciprocity;
 - b) India will react to both internal and external developments in its neighbourhood from a moral high ground'

- c) India will not allow its territory to be used against the interest of any country in the region;
- d) India will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries in the area, and would expect the others to observe this principle as well;
- e) India respects the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of all the states of the region,
- f) India is determined to settle all its disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations.

Former Prime Minister, Gujral maintained that the implementation of these principles would generate a climate of close and mutually benign cooperation in the region where the weight and size of India was regarded positively as an asset by these countries, promising its vital interests. India should be prepared to sacrifice some of its non-vital interests. It is hoped that a change in India's attitude would usher in an environment conducive to the promotion of regional cooperation in South Asia.

2. It is need of hour to India act as more generosity towards neighbour countries by providing in terms of infrastructure, energy, water, trade, climate change mitigation, higher education, healthcare and military cooperation ect.,. Which are should improve among the neighbour countries on India.

3. India should contain the China's intervention in South Asia Region by implement the democratic principles and non-neo colonialism which are promoting the trust in the neighbour countries. Because China is following the policies of communism dictatorship internally and exploitative trade policy externally and both policies are sign of autocratic rule and neo-colonialism.

4. India should try to minimize its tensions with Pakistan because without Pakistan cooperation SAARC objectives should not be materialized. Though the unending problems like Kashmir issue and cross border terrorism breached the relations with Pakistan, India should try to take initiative to minimize the tensions for the sake of two countries in particular for South Asia region in general.

To conclude, for the betterment of India's initiatives in the SAARC, India should act as a guardian of SAARC regarding the implementation of its aims and objectives. India should play dual role in this regard; to contain China's intervention in South Asia region on one hand and on other hand to promote Pakistan's presence in the SAARC activities. Unless India follows these policies perfectly, her initiatives should not be materialized in the SAARC.

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