

SAARC: FROM HERBINGER OF HOPE TO BUBBLES OF HOPE

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“We have no eternal allies and no Perpetual enemies,
Our interests are eternal and perpetual...”

Lord Palmerstone, Former Prime Minister, Uk

The advocates of political realism usually believe that the international arena is nothing but a state of anarchy where political units, i.e., the states, generally pursue a foreign policy designed to achieve National interests, even at the cost of its own national value and national character. Therefore, according to the realists, there is no eternal friend, no eternal enemy, only eternal interests. And this is the essence of foreign policy of a state. Lord Palmerstone's view mentioned above was expressed during the first half of the 19th century and it appears still important today. Perhaps this realistic view was the motive force of the thinking of General Zia-ur-Rahman, the army chief turned President of Bangladesh, in the beginning of 1980s. General Zia wisely realised that there was no other way to rapid Socio-economic growth along with nation-building for an infant nation like Bangladesh than the cooperation of the neighbouring countries especially the regional big power, India. He initiated a plan for the establishment of an economic cooperation regime in South Asia. Probably the role of the European Economic Community (EEC) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) were the inspiration behind his efforts.

Immediately after the second world war a number of intergovernmental and supranational regional organization of economic cooperation were established for economic reconstruction of war-torn Europe, namely OECD, EEC, etc. Neo functionalist thesis of Ernst B. Haas put forward the concept of 'spill over effect' in discussing the inevitability of cooperation among neighbouring states, albeit their border disputes and disagreement on other common issues. 'Spill Over' in functional cooperation means interconnectedness of various economic sectors or issue-areas of common interests. As a consequence, the integration in one policy area spills over into other areas (Haas). In the south Asian region, however, there were border disputes between India and Pakistan or between India and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka also facing threat from India on Tamil issues

and land-locked Nepal had to depend on India for its supply line even with discontent to some extent. In spite of all the discontent and disputes among the states of this region, cooperation in the field of common interests was inevitable to drive out poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, superstition etc—realized General Zia-ur-Rahman in the early eighties. He initiated negotiation with statesmen of South Asia and India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh, the seven sisters of South Asia agreed to act upon corporation among themselves.

After Much deliberations and sincere initiatives of various working groups the South Asian association for regional cooperation (SAARC) came into being as a harbinger of new hopes in December 1985.

II

The journey was started in the later half of 1970's when President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh began to meet the Premiers and statesmen of Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan to chalk out a concrete proposal for regional economic cooperation. General zia passed away in May 1981, but efforts continued and in 1983 foreign ministers of seven South Asian countries signed a declaration of South Asian regional cooperation after a meeting held in August in New Delhi. They also agreed upon certain common areas of cooperation such as agriculture rural development materialology health telecommunication science and technology and many others and declared an integrated program of action (IPA) for which high level working groups had been formed. Eventually the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established. Heads of Government of seven South Asian countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka- signed a charter on 8th December 1985 which declared the establishment by SAARC. In April 2007 Afghanistan became the eight member of SAARC.

Geographically, South Asia is dominated by Indian plate and surrounded by Himalayas and karakoram mountains and Pamir Plateau on the north and Indian ocean on the south. South Asia is bounded by West Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and South East Asia on land. The region covers about 5.2 million km which is about 3.5% of the total land of the world. South Asia is the most populas and most densely populated geographical region in the world with a population of 1.94 billion according to a world bank report in 2020. The common definition of South Asia bears the legacy of the administrative areas of the British colonial rule except the two Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal and Bhutan. As most part of the region were under the British rule there are remnants of colonialism that manifest in different aspects of bilateral relations of South Asian nations in the form of border disputes, mutual suspicion, row over interstate river water etc.

In spite of disagreements, bilateral discontents, mutual suspicion and row over many issues among the nations of the region, the need for functional cooperation among them was given priority in the foreign policies of the countries of South Asian region.

III

According to Art I of the SAARC charter signed by the heads of governments of the seven regional nations on 8 December 1985 the basic objectives of these regional cooperation organisation are-

- a) To promote welfare of the people of South Asia and improve their quality of life;
- b) To accelerate economic growth social progress and cultural development in this region and to provide the opportunity to the people to live with dignity;
- c) To promote and strengthen collective self Reliance among the member countries;
- d) To rely on the mutual trust understanding and appreciation of one another's problem;
- e) To create an atmosphere of unity and confidence among the people of this region;
- f) to enhance mutual cooperation in socio economic, cultural scientific and ecological fields;
- g) to increase corporation with other developing countries;
- h) To increase and enhance corporation with other global and regional organisations.

To implement this objectives mentioned above, art II of the SAARC charter incorporates following principles—

- a) to ensure active mutual cooperation among member States on the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political freedom, mutual non interference and mutual benefit.
- b) this type of cooperation should not replace bi-lateral and multi lateral cooperation rather they are supplementary to each other.
- c) this cooperation must not be viewed as inconsistent with bilateral and multilateral commitments.

IV

The institutionalisation of SAARC has been accomplished with the creation of a hierarchical organizational structure. In this hierarchy, the conference of the heads of governments of all members countries is the Apex body which meets once in a year popularly known as SAARC Summit. The council of SAARC ministers consisting of external affairs ministers of member countries is at the Second stage of hierarchy which is a real decision making body of the organization. The Standing Committee consisted of the foreign secretaries of the member states act as the administrative unit of SAARC. There is a Secretariate located at Kathmandu, the capital of Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal under the stewardship of a Secretary General which coordinates the day to day activities of SAARC. In spite of the the main bodies there are several technical and specialized committees and agencies and commissions to look after specific issues.

Since its inception Eighteenth SAARC Summit meetings have been held till date with zeal to achieve its declared objective. 19TH SAARC Summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad on 15th november 2016. But due to terrorist attack in Uri sector by the Pakistan supported terrorist outfit India refused to participate in the proposed 19th Summit.

As a consequence Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka pulled themselves out of the Summit. Only Nepal remained silent on the issue.

LIST OF SAARC SUMMIT

No of Summits	Dates	Places
1.	7-8 December 1985	Dhaka
2.	17 to 18 November 1986	Bengaluru
3.	2 to 4 November 1987	Kathmandu
4.	29-31 December 1988	Islamabad
5.	21-23 november 1990	Male
6.	21 st December 1991	Colombo
7	10-11 April 1992	Dhaka
8.	2 to 4 may 1997	New Delhi
9.	12-14 May 1997	Male
10	29-31 July 1998	Colombo
11.	4 to 6 January 2002	Kathmandu
12	4 to 6 January 2004	Islamabad
13.	12 to 13 Novemnber 2005	Dhaka
14.	3 to 4 April 2007	New Delhi
15.	1 st to 3 rd August 2008	Colombo
16.	28-29 April 2010	Thimpu
17.	10- 11 Novemvber 2011	Addu City (Maldives)
18.	26- 27 November 2014	Kathmandu

Source: Aneek Chatterjee International Relations Today: Concept And Application. Pearson, New Delhi.

V

Political and diplomatic atmosphere in South Asia has drastically been deteriorating since the Uri militant attack on September 18 2016 by Jais-E- Mohammed, Pakistan based terrorist outfit attacked army brigade headquarter in Uri sector in Jammu and Kashmir leaving 23 army men dead. This incident was followed by cross border attack and counter attack by the two arch enemies India and Pakistan, witnessing a macabre dance of death at Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir where 49 CRPF jawans were spot dead due to a terrorist ambush using vehicle borne suicide bomber. A series of cross border attacks by the Pakistan based militants on Indian cops and army men since 2016 (Pathankote airbase attack, Uri army brigade attack etc.) had fuelled to the worsening of relationship between two major powers of SAARC, contributing to dead lock in the Islamabad SAARC summit. On the inauguration day of 19th SAARC summit in Islamabad

India refused to continue as a participant in the summit on protest against the terrorist attack and this was followed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Nepal was the chairperson of the Summit and remained silent on the issue for obvious reasons. Since then SAARC summit remains stalled and there is no sign of solution to the problem in the near future. SAARC was the harbinger of new hopes to the people of South Asia in the 1980s now appears as the bubble of hope which may burst on the sky of South Asia sooner or later.

It is well known that since the 1990s some of SAARC member countries used to watch India's behaviour and actions with blinkered suspicion. They were anxious about Indian intentions in this region. These countries are worried and apprehensive about the strategies of negotiations that India undertook in its relations with the neighbours regarding the distribution of cross border river water, common border, bilateral trade etc. Discontent developed among the members and began to manifest when Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the BNP Government of Bangladesh refused to accept India's proposals on many important issues. Some of the countries of this region apprehended that India might exert influence on their people and society to fulfill its own national interest. All this created a complex and frustrating situation for SAARC. In this atmosphere members states are trying to cultivate bilateral relations with common interest paving the way for the erosion of the role of SAARC as regional cooperation organisation.

During this hectic period since late 2016, shift in the foreign policy perceptions of both the Indian and Pakistan government in Islamabad is evident. Islamabad is gradually strengthening cooperation with China and it is well known that China and India are the chief contenders of leadership in this subcontinent. In spite of the modernisation of Gwadar port in Balochistan in which Chinese technology and capital were fully invested. Pakistan also extends its hand to China for the building of Karakoram Highway across the north eastern part of Pakistan and actively participate in the Chinese Belt and Road (BRI) programme. On the other hand China nurtures a secret dream of imposing a new security and cooperation regime in South Asia replacing SAARC which will render the role of India insignificant and redundant in this subcontinent thereby paving the way for Chinese dominance in South Asia and Indian Ocean region.

Interestingly Chinese activities in this region, covert or overt, have gained momentum in the last 10 years. Financial aid, long term loan, lease of property, a meeting military help etc. are the main weapons of the Chinese intruders. In January 2021, China arranged on the Covid-19 with 5 SAARC countries - Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, barring India, Bhutan and Maldives.

China has started its journey towards the Indian Ocean since 2010 when the management of the Hambantota International Port of Sri Lanka, located in the extreme south of this island-state went under the control of China Merchant Port jointly with Sri Lanka Port Authority. The port is modernised by the Chinese authority. It is a part

of 21st Centuries Maritime Silk road that runs from the Chinese coast via the Suez canal to the Mediterranean. The Chinese merchant port was granted a 99 years lease of Hambantota International Port in 2017 as a compensation of the non payment of Debt by the Sri Lankan authority to China.

Maldives were also in a Chinese debt trap since 2017 and succumbed to the repayment pressure by the Chinese Eximbank. The 6.15 km long Padma bridge on the Padma river in Bangladesh inaugurated by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in June 2022 is the testimony of Chinese success story. Moreover K.P. Sharma Oli's Nepal is a major recipient of Chinese funds and other help. So, the engagement of China in the infrastructure development of some of the South Asian countries is the clear evidence of the failure of SAARC and the erosion of Indian influence in this subcontinent. And obviously China has a secret alternative regional framework for South Asia where India is unwanted.

VI

With this background, NDA government in India has changed its stance on regional politics. Policy makers at South block have realised that it is time to find out alternative multinational cooperation framework for the South Asian region to combat Chinese encroachment in South Asia. The weapons available at present in the hand of India are BIMSTEC, BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. BIMSTEC is directly associated with south and South East Asia and Indian Ocean region.

Bay of Bengal initiative for a Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) founded in June 1997 with seven South Asian countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Pakistan and China are excluded from the list. In its initial stage BIMSTEC was an organisation of technical corporation of countries which are dependent on Bay of Bengal. But India began to use BIMSTEC as a platform of alternative regional cooperation framework free from Chinese encroachment through Pakistan.

Therefore, It appears that the future of SAARC is extremely cloudy in the atmosphere of mutual distress and anxiety among all members countries. SAARC, which was harbinger of new hopes in its inception, now simply becomes bubbles of hope.

Further Readings:

1. Ernest B Haas: *Uniting Of Europe* (Stanford University Press 1958).
2. Anesh Chatterjee: *International Relations Today: Concepts And Applications* (Pearson Delhi).
3. Rajiv Ranjan and Guo Changgang (ed): *China And South Asia: Changing Regional Dynamics Development And Power Play*. (Taylor And Francis 2021).