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Reformation of SAARC: Cut the Controversies, Add the Common Interest in Area of Cooperation

Regionalism is a kind of multinational grouping where the components indicate and verify a common interest and goal and work together to achieve those goals. The reason for working together could be economic prosperity or security. After Second World War nations have realized that they need to work as a one region to fight against their common problems. Learning from other models of Regional Organizations, SAARC was established in 1985 but still SAARC, South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation, is more or less not functioning well. It could be the size and the dominating development of India, both economic and social, which is stopping other member nations of SAARC to come together and contribute equally or the model it developed upon is flawed. Here, in this article an attempt has been made to find out the Internal and External factors which are stopping SAARC to function well as well as to suggest measures to improve its performance. .



Reformation of SAARC: Cut the Controversies, Add the Common Interest in Area of Cooperation

Saroj Aryal

Analyzing the historical facts and trends of functioning of SAARC, it is clearly visible that SAARC has been not functioning effectively till the date. I agree with the opinions of those scholars who define SAARC as 'Soap Opera". However, author is not very much pessimistic about future. SAARC is not functioning effectively now does not mean it could never function in intended way as envisioned during its establishment. There are still a room existing for better future of SAARC for the sake of all South Asian nations and citizens. It cannot be the fate of South Asian people to live under economic backwardness always relatively than that of other regions of world. It will certainly improve. For the improvement, SAARC should work for economic prosperity of South Asian People. Moreover, not SAARC should, but SAARC must work for economic forwardness.

There are versatility between South Asian People including religions, culture, ethnicity, language and many other things, which has become obstacle for the effective SAARC. But, there is one thing in common between all South Asian people despite of their various religious, cultural and ethnical differences. That is poverty. Poverty is common characteristic of all South Asian People. Thus, SAARC could be deeply integrated on the base of working together to fight with its common enemy; poverty. Thus, the only area in which, SAARC could catch the common aspiration of all countries, all nations, all religion, all ethnicity, is economy. Let us first analyze the factors of ineffectiveness of SAARC.



Internal Factor

I. Historical Dispute between India-Pakistan

Pakistan is divided nation from India. Cultural diversity and the political tensions between these two states get an international attention time and again. There is certain issue of border dispute since the division. Among them the land of Kashmir and India-Pakistan's will to administer the land has already drag these nation into war several times. Political, social, cultural, economical factors and the crucial one is the power blocs and their own interest regarding these two nations simply prove that these two countries are historical enemy.

II. Historical Dispute between Bangladesh-Pakistan

Similarly, Bangladesh is also separated country from Pakistan. As it was part of Pakistan earlier, political biasness and centralized policy spread huge dissatisfaction in Bangladeshi peoples. So there is no more than ego in relations between these states. This is the major reason behind the emotional dispute between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

III. Sri Lankan Civil War

Sri Lanka has gone through almost two decade long civil war fought by Tamils. In the civil war, India have supported revolutionary side in the beginning but later changed it stance and helped Sri Lankan Government to suppress the Tamil Movement. The angry Tamil has assassinated the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi using a suicide bomber. After the intelligence failure which couldn't save their own prime minister, Indian army starts to withdrawal from Sri Lanka. Many scholars argue that after withdrawal of Indian Army from Sri Lanka, China secretly initiated the anti-Tiger campaign and take that to end. This incident not



only settle the long internal conflict but also gives space to China in the region and at the same time creates huge dissatisfaction for India.

Thus, India has relationship of love and hate with Sri Lanka.

IV. Size of India

Size of India is multiple times bigger than all other nations of South Asia. India strength in terms of geography, demography, economy, military and presence in International scene is incomparable to other nations of South Asia. Thus, the smaller nations feel bullied or dominated by India. Sometime India really does so but sometime it is just the problem of inferior complexity. Whether interfering in domestic politics of neighbor states or showing the big brother nature to all member states, India is somehow losing its faith among its neighbor nations due to their spy led foreign policy approach. Similarly, all other nations are always suspicious of India for losing their right to exercise sovereignty.

Non-declared sanction to Nepal (2015-16), Maldives fish and Climate Change Crisis, Sri Lankan Civil War, Kashmir Issue, Bangladesh Refugee and Border Issue, India have problem with almost every member states of SAARC.

V. Religious/cultural/ethnic diversity

South Asia is very diverse consisting hundreds of different religion, cultures, languages and ethnicities. If it was mono-ethnic region, there must not be so much historical disputes and anger against each other. There are so many examples where a community or a ethnicity has attacked a different ethnicity or a community with no reason then a cultural disparity.



External Factors

I. Chinese Influence in member state of SAARC

China is flexing its muscles to establish its own sphere of influence among South Asian nations. The distrust on India is giving space for China to play in internal matter of South Asian nations. Instead of playing a role of big brother in the region, India herself has failed time and again to harmonize the region. Whether it is to create anti-Indian sentiments or it's their policy on behalf of creating Strings of Pearl on this geographical territory but China already have created bigger space among SAARC member states. For instance recent promulgated constitution of Nepal has been refused and blamed to be biased by Indian side. First of all, it was abided by more than 90% of representative of Constituent Assembly and secondly as a sovereign state India can't interfere or be interested actively in the internal matter of its neighbor. Aftermath of this incident India not only increased anti-Indian sentiment among Nepalese citizen but gives enough space to China to create their own level of trust in small south Asian state, Nepal.

II. SAARC is not common entity of South Asian Nations for external forces

USA, Russia, China, EU and other external forces have bilateral relations with each member states of SAARC but they do not have formal relation (any kind of treaty, agreement or program) with SAARC as a single entity. This is the outcome of distrust by all member states to their own regional organization which was believed to be a corner stone on their path to development and prosperity. So, the relations between external parties and SAARC, as a regional organization, have been determined in Ad-hoc basis.



Path to Integrity: *Learning from Other Models*

Jampudwip Region

Jampdwip region is ancient name of South Asian Region. During the attack of Alexander in states of this region, Regional sentiments caused the birth of alliance between the then states of this region. They made military alliance and fought with Alexander. Chankaya was the founder of this regionalism. The sentiment, which aroused putting the religious/cultural difference and all egos between each other behind curtain, they fought together to defend the region. Thus, South Asian people should look into it past and learnt from it.

European Union

Let's go back to history and watch the historical relation of Germany-Poland and India-Pakistan. Which one is bitter? Obviously Germany-Poland relation is bitter. The past of any two member-states of Europe is far bitterer than that of any two member-states of South Asia. But still, European nation are working together for the sake of progress and security of their region. They are exemplary for regional cooperation. SAARC should learn from the Polish aspiration after the end of Cold war which aspires, "to be done with past, to build a solid basis for mutual relations and to work together to build a united Europe". SAARC should also have the similar kinds of sentiment as Europe.

ASEAN

Let us look into the slogan of ASEAN, which utters, "one vision, one identity and one community". This slogan suggests lots of things to South Asia. Each nation of ASEAN have



their distinguish culture, religion and civilization background, but still they are strived for building one common identity.

Alternatives on SAARC

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation - (BIMSTEC)

BIMSTEC has been formed in 6 June 1967 as a new sub-regional grouping in Bangkok which includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri-Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal. This grouping is very carefully designed as it excludes Pakistan, which has biggest problem with India and potential to deter India and includes some other South East Asian nations. The main achievement of BIMSTEC is BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement. "BIMSTEC member countries agreed to establish the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement in order to stimulate trade and investment in the parties, and attract outsiders to trade with and invest in BIMSTEC at a higher level"¹. The agreement is not yet into force. The agreement is mere a paper only. Formation of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area has still a long way to go.

BBIN

Only in this month, Current office-bearing Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India comes up with the concept of sub-regional grouping of "Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal". This concept is also carefully designed by India as it excludes all the South Asian nations (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka); which have either problem with India or close relation with China or facing internal conflicts. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are very pro-Indian

¹ Bimstec.org., (2015). // Free Trade Agreement - Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Retrieved 21 June 2015, from <http://www.bimstec.org/index.php?page=free-trade-agreement>



nations. These countries have no such anger towards India as other have. Thus, this concept could be proved effective. In fact within the few days of emergence of this concept, the four nations signed a very important deal on transportation sector. "India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh signed a landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) for the Regulation of Passenger, Personnel and Cargo Vehicular Traffic among the four South Asian neighbors in Thimpu, Bhutan on 15 June 2015. The MVA agreement between sub-grouping of four SAARC nations, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) will pave the way for a seamless movement of people and goods across their borders for the benefit and integration of the region and its economic development."²

Chatterge and Singh in the diplomat write, "How long can SAARC wait for India and Pakistan to sort out their bilateral issues and push forward for the broader agenda of regional economic cooperation?"³ They further say, "It is now clear that India will not wait ad infinitum for SAARC to make progress and become an effective institution."⁴ They suggest, "the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC, consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, and Sri Lanka) will be a viable option for India to forge an effective regional group to promote broader economic integration"⁵.

But, I strongly disagree with above Indian Perspectives of excluding Pakistan from the sub-regional groupings. In both model of BIMSTEC or BBIN, notably Pakistan is excluded. This

2 Pib.nic.in., (2015). India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh Sign a landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement for seamless movement of road traffic among Four SAARC Countries in Thimpu. Retrieved 21 June 2015, from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=122516>

3 Chatterjee, B., & Singh, S. (2015). Time to Energize BIMSTEC. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved 21 June 2015, from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/time-to-energize-bimstec/>

4 *ibidem*/there/

5 *ibidem*/there/



could not be a long-term solution. The Pakistan left under poverty would always remain as threat to the region. Without prosperous Pakistan, peace and development in the region is impossible. Thus, the above mentioned alternative models will back-fare the region in future.

Conclusion: Way Forward

There are lots of exemplary functions of other model of regionalism from which SAARC could learn and imitate. However, the ideals explained above are not suggestible for SAARC for now. SAARC have to wait for same level and kind of cooperation as Jambudwip, EU or ASEAN. But, it does not mean SAARC cannot do anything now and should keep quite. In my opinion, SAARC should start working from an easy point in effective manner now to reach the ideals of Jambudwip, EU or ASEAN. That point is "fighting against poverty". SAARC needs to start common efforts to end the poverty in the region. If SAARC start to work in the area of economy from now, it will certainly reach to the level of deep integration of EU and ASEAN.

I suggest that "**Cut the issue of controversies and touch only the issue of common interests**" to pave the way. SAARC should, at least for the current period, avoid the issue of controversies and touch only on the issue of common interest to pave the way of effective cooperation. The concepts of economic cooperation, which is being trying to build within framework of BIMSTEC and BBIN, should be built under SAARC.

Issue of Controversies

- I. Fundamentalism/Religious terrorism
- II. Border Disputes (Kashmir Issue)
- III. Free Movement of Person



Above area is not the safe area for starting the functioning of SAARC. If tried to build cooperation in these area now, SAARC would reach nowhere. May be this could be the area of work in future. For now SAARC should start from area, which is area of attraction and common interest to all the countries, nations, religions, cultures of SAARC. It would pave the way of SAARC to reach the ultimate ideal of regionalism set by EU and ASEAN.

Area of Common Interest

In my opinion, the common interest of South Asian people, regardless of religion, culture and ethnicity, is removing economic backwardness. Thus, Economic Cooperation could be the most attractive area for all. I strongly opine that SAARC could start its effective functioning from building the **Free Trade Zone** in South Asia Region.

Why free trade zone?

India and Nepal is practicing free border since 1950. It was when India and Nepal signed Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Similarly, there are no any barriers to move both ways, in case of India and Bhutan. But, still the border less nations is facing custom charges in their trade relations.

Let's talk about my personal experience. I use 'Pulsar 220' motorbike manufactured in India by Bajaj Company, when an Indian citizen buys that bike it costs them 60,000 INR. Being a Nepali citizen when I bought the bike I paid 1, 80, 00 NPR, which is more than 200 percent extra charge then to buy it in India. It is the same case to other member states of region. So that, the custom duty policy of South Asian nation, is effecting directly to its trade relations.



On 2004 SAFTA was created by the intention to remove all those custom duties between member states. Member states have agreed to remove all the custom duties of traded good by zero till 2016. But unfortunately SAFTA is not making any progress.

If South Asia take a reference from European model of free trade agreement, that are absolutely not complicated but effective. EU exchange trade between member states in the basis of Single Market Policy which basically focus in four areas free movement of goods, people, capital and services. These are the basic principles if a region will to established free trade zone. South Asia can learn from European and ASEAN model of trading concept by which they can gain and developed their economy.

Following are the benefits of working in free trade zone in South Asia:

- **Beneficial for all**

Free movement of people, goods, capital and services opens a wider space for all citizens, companies, self-employed service providers and investors, to move and explore more in their benefits. In the context of south Asia there is India, which is biggest among all and there are other small member states which have poor economic condition. But, free trade zone gives space to all the member states equally to flex their opportunity in wider level. All can benefits in same level.

- **India will accept because biggest always gets most benefits**

India is 4th largest economy of world. It is only possible if a nation is able to internalize huge flow of FDI inflows. India is producing in mass level and exporting it to world. So if south Asia starts to practice free trade zone then the market of all member states will be in access of India to sell their product easily.

India holds almost 80% of economy, population, territory among member states. So that it is only possible to thinking about establishing Free trade zone if India want it to implement. It will not function if India is excluded in it. Free trade zone concept in South Asia is in favor of India then other member states because it is biggest state.

So that creating free trade zone will be supported fully by India after allit will be in their most favor.

- **Doesn't hamper the security interests of individual nations**

South Asia and its member states are led by full of complexities. There are many sorts of disputes between member states; it could be territorial dispute, cultural disputes and issues of minorities. As per I mentioned previously ego factors plays a bigger role in relation between states.

So what I am saying currently power hassle between US and china is over shadowed by trade relations, today they are the biggest trade partner. So that, the similar kind of trade agreement, can freeze all those disputes between member states, and helps to harmonizing the relationship in economic way.

Once the mechanism of free trade zone will be implemented in South Asia it opens up the possibilities to create other common issues to be agreed in. And other beneficial part of single market policy is all those third nations who are working bilaterally with member states of South Asia can now deal with a regional organization. By this all small and not involved member states also can benefit equally.



End Notes

Bimstec.org. (2015). // Free Trade Agreement - Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Retrieved 21 June 2015, from <http://www.bimstec.org/index.php?page=free-trade-agreement>

2 Pib.nic.in. (2015). India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh Sign a landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement for seamless movement of road traffic among Four SAARC Countries in Thimpu. Retrieved 21 June 2015, from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=122516>

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