

## **A Political Perspective for SAARC**

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### **Abstract**

In the near three decadal existence of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), politics has been one of those 'untouchables' which the regional grouping overtly detests and apparently tries to keep away from formal deliberations. The SAARC charter manifestly bars discussions on bilateral contentious issues for the sake of the 'regional spirit' which may become a casualty if politics creeps in. Yet the politics of the region always looms large over every SAARC summit and often decides as to whether there can be any movement on the more amenable economic issues. It has been the contention of the author that the economics of SAARC can't be separated from the politics of it and injection of political realism in the grouping is needed sooner than later if it is to remain relevant. Mindful of the difficulties that such a proposition may pose, the paper tries to make a case for making a distinction between 'soft politics' which may be encouraged in the grouping which may lay the groundwork for a future 'hard politics' in order to make SAARC more meaningful than it has been till now.

### **History and Politics of SAARC**

When the idea of a regional association in South Asia gained ground in the early eighties, the political leadership was quite mindful of the political environment both external and internal that could shape the future of the grouping. Internally, there had been a history of latent and manifest hostility between India and Pakistan, the issue of Tamils in Sri Lanka had been gradually erupting to the detriment of its bilateral ties with India and the issues relating to borders and resources kept surfacing between India and its other smaller neighbors. Externally, the cold war had stepped right into the extended South Asian neighborhood with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan becoming involved headlong in the American efforts to counter the Soviet influence. It was quite natural therefore that the years preceding the formation of SAARC were marked by very gradual and cautious attempts to forge a consensus among the potential members of the need and the necessity of a regional grouping.

While the proposal for a regional association was first mooted by the then Bangladeshi President Zia-Ur Rehman, and endorsed by other smaller countries of the region, skepticism was more evident among the bigger partners. While India was apprehensive of such a grouping becoming a platform for accumulated grievances against India, Pakistan was not very sure of being part of a group which could always be dominated by India given its predominant size and position. In any case divergence of mutual security and political perceptions were seen as far too pervasive to give convergence of the collective social and economic interests a concrete

shape in the form of a regional association.<sup>1</sup> Neither was there a compelling external motivation (like in the case of Association for South East Asian Nations where containing the Communist Chinese influence may have been a factor) to bring nations of South Asia together.

Notwithstanding the above infirmities for the idea of the 'regional' the opinion gradually transformed in supporting and exploring prospects of cooperation rather than having no cooperation at all. In keeping with the cautious and gradual approach, the first SAARC Declaration of the Heads of States issued at the inaugural Dhaka Summit in 1985, limited the reference of the 'political' only to the member nations 'reaffirming their commitment to the UN Charter and the principles governing sovereign equality of States, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in internal affairs and non-use or threat of use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of other States. Besides, they reiterated that the United Nations constituted the most important forum for the resolution of all issues affecting international peace and security.'<sup>2</sup>

More importantly it was decided that discussions on contentious issues that may have an unsettling effect on the spirit of cooperation ought to be left out of the deliberations. Getting caught in a scenario where political differences among the countries become the stumbling block was perhaps the last thing that the leaders wanted as the SAARC attempted to establish its roots and the same was elaborated more clearly in article X of the SAARC Charter stating:

- '1. Decisions at all levels are to be taken on the basis of unanimity
2. Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations'<sup>3</sup>

The above two provisions became the cornerstone of the SAARC policy to keep the political disputes at arm's length so that the regional spirit could prevail upon bilateral tensions that remained omnipresent. The principle of unanimity in decision making was a step designed to take all the members on board as important decisions on economic, social and cultural well being were taken and the chances of individual reservations on key issues be pre-empted. The clause on excluding bilateral and contentious issues foreclosed the possibility of two nations getting caught in a bilateral spat in the regional forum and thereby hampering the possibility of a unanimous position even on issues which had completely apolitical moorings.

Seen in a historical perspective, such a move perhaps was well conceived keeping in mind the history of tension and conflict among member nations. It was apparent that India and Pakistan needed some built in assurances within the grouping that the forum will not be used for purposes detrimental to their own political interests. The smaller states on the other hand, far too keen to have the two big countries on board (SAARC minus India or Pakistan would have

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<sup>1</sup> Kishore C Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia : Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p.87

<sup>2</sup> Declaration of the First SAARC Summit held at Dhaka, SAARC Declarations, 1985-2007, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, p.8

<sup>3</sup> Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, signed on December 8, 1985 at Dhaka in SAARC Conventions, 1985-2007, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, p.10.

made no sense), were completely at ease with the clauses as it made them equal stakeholders and partners in a seemingly asymmetric grouping. With such an implicit assurance on the political role of the grouping, the members could therefore hope to embark on a more plausible goal of 'promoting peace, stability, amity and progress' in the region as spelt out in the Charter itself. That the grouping was finally able to take off at a time when the sub-continental politics was in the midst of a serious drift with issues of ethnic conflict and terrorism appeared to be acquiring transnational manifestation, was indeed a tribute to collective will of the smaller members of the association.

However, as things were to unfold subsequently, while SAARC started taking gradual steps towards regional cooperation, the shadow of sub-continental politics kept looming large over the deliberations. At times, to the extent of cancellation of summits themselves as the scheduling required consent of all the members states and often the pretext of one nation was used to cover for the lack of will of another nation to be part of the Summit due to reasons which had no bearing in so far as the SAARC charter was concerned. As examined in the following section, the pace and trajectory of SAARC in the first decade of its evolution saw politics making an entry through backdoors, often hindering a meaningful head start that could have been taken in economic matters at the time.

### **The First Phase: Soft Politics and institutional Consolidation**

The first decade of SAARC's evolution can best be described as the one of institutional consolidation with the interspersing of 'soft' politics that definitely marked the growth of the grouping, but never really came in the way of new ideas emerging. With the decision taken to have Kathmandu as the headquarters of the regional association, the symbolic political neutrality of the venue was not lost sight of. The initial years focused more on developing the structures and mechanisms of cooperation rather than the substance of it. Perhaps it was felt that actual progress could follow once the structures were put in place. In any case, this also was in conformity with the cautious optimism that had marked the years up to the launching of the grouping itself.

The SAARC therefore embarked on a comprehensive Integrated Plan of Action (IPA) in thirteen identified areas of cooperation which were to be operationalised through an overload of bureaucratic and inter-ministerial mechanism before it got the sanction of the respective Heads of States.<sup>4</sup> While the IPAs were comprehensive in their scope and laudable in their objectives, there remained a significant gap in terms of how they were to be operationalised. The detailed apparatus that was created to formalize the IPAs consisted of the Technical Committees, consisting of experts and officials belonging to the area, the Standing Committees consisting of foreign secretaries of the members countries, the Council of Ministers consisting of the foreign Ministers and finally the Summit level consisting of the Heads of state giving the final

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<sup>4</sup> The IPA initially focused on five agreed areas of cooperation: agriculture, rural development, meteorology, health and population activities. Later, it was expanded to transport, postal services, scientific and technological cooperation, sports, arts and culture.

endorsement. The period also saw the setting up of some important regional institutions such as the SAARC Food Security Reserve, the SAARC Agriculture Information Centre, and the signing of some important convention such as the SAARC convention on suppression of Terrorism.

As the edifice and mechanism of institutional cooperation was being built, there were enough indications in the beginning itself that political issues simply could not be set aside and often the SAARC summits became instrumental or at times victim to a behind the scene political activity that was to shape the broader contours of sub-continental politics. Some examples in this direction elucidate the point.

As the second SAARC summit to be held at Bangalore in 1986 approached, the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka was gradually unfolding in a manner which was threatening to go beyond the bilateral ambit of India Sri Lanka relations. India sought to pre-empt the role of the LTTE by trying to arrange for a meeting between the Sri Lankan President Julius Jayewardene and the LTTE leader V Prabhakaran at the Bangalore summit, but it ended in a failure.<sup>5</sup> It is quite evident that neither India nor Sri Lanka at that stage was shy of discussing what was purely bilateral and certainly contentious, using SAARC as a backdrop. This was perhaps also to set the stage for a future role of SAARC as a medium for informal consultation between regional leaders which could otherwise not have happened in instances of charged bilateral atmosphere. The point got reinforced shortly at the third SAARC summit held at Kathmandu in 1987.

The Kathmandu Summit was preceded by a sudden deterioration in intra-regional relations as India's overt display of regional assertion by air dropping relief supplies in the Jaffna peninsula, then in the midst of fierce assault by the Sri Lankan forces, enraged the Jayewardene government and it threatened withdrawal from the forthcoming summit. This led to speculations that the politics might eventually catch up with the regional association barely third year in its inception. But surprisingly, smaller nations were able to convince Sri Lanka of the benefits of a collective well being and the summit eventually provided scope for informal consultation between the Indian and the Sri Lankan leaders, paving the way for the eventual India-Lankan agreement of 1987. The Summit also provided an opportunity to the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers to discuss the Sino-Chinese issue and the issue of boundary demarcation around Sir Creek in Rann of Kutch area. Similar consultations of the Indian Prime Minister with his Bangladeshi and Nepalese counterparts provided an opportunity to clear the air on several vexed issues.

In a way, the outcome of the Kathmandu summit proved to go much beyond the expectations of the attending members as it dawned that finally the SAARC spirit had automatically created an environment where the vexed economic issues between two members could be given a special attention. In the following summit at Islamabad (1988), the impression got further reinforced as India and Pakistan under the young leadership of Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto set about establishing new confidence building measures such as the agreement not to attack

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<sup>5</sup> J N Dixit, 'The LTTE's insistence on the creation of a separate Tamil state would have far-reaching negative implications for India's unity' Rediff special <http://m.rediff.com/news/oct/30dixit4.htm> accessed on 26th February, 2012

each other's nuclear facilities at the sidelines of the Summit.<sup>6</sup> The summit therefore was regarded as an important aspect of the renewed confidence building mechanism between the two larger members of the SAARC, a trend that was to be repeated more often in the coming years, at times taking the focus and limelight away from the main regional agenda.

Not that the trend remained persistent. SAARC was to receive one of its first political shocks the very next year when the Colombo Summit scheduled to be held in 1989 got cancelled because of the heightened confrontation between India and Sri Lanka over the latter's insistence on withdrawal of Indian Peace Keeping Forces from the island nation. Technically speaking, the issue should not have had any bearing on the SAARC process, being a purely bilateral issue, but the shadow of bilateralism had already been cast over the SAARC process in the earlier summits. The Summit therefore had to be shifted to Male in 1990. The IPKF issue remained a major irritant till their eventual withdrawal and after a lot of hiccups finally Colombo hosted a summit in December, 1991. It had become fairly evident by now that the SAARC process could not remain immune to the tribulations of bilateral relations that had come to plague the member countries, so if at all SAARC had to make a meaningful transition, there should be a greater economic thrust to the relationship, notwithstanding the politics of the region.

### **Economics despite politics: SAARC in the 1990s**

The early nineties in many ways were defining for South Asia as a region and SAARC as a manifestation of its regionalism. In tune with global and regional trends, there was a greater momentum towards democratization in South Asia as Nepal and Bangladesh made their transition to respective Parliamentary democracies and joined the other countries in their own democratic experimentation. At the same time most of the member countries embarked on economic reforms focusing on opening up of their hitherto inward oriented trade and industrial policies. It was realized that reforms and liberalization across the regional countries could yield better dividends if there was greater economic coordination and thus a clearer focus on economic cooperation emerged. The declaration of the 6<sup>th</sup> Summit held at Dhaka in 1992, which had perhaps the longest ever para on international economic issues called for

- a) More business- like approach to SAARC deliberations so that greater dynamism could be injected to the core areas of economic, social and cultural importance,
- b) Support to the framework for intra-regional trade liberalization through the framework for South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) and
- c) Greater coordination of mutual positions so as to have a collective position in global economic for a so that a 'South Asian 'view-point could be made visible.<sup>7</sup>

With a clearer mandate for moving into core areas of economic cooperation, political factors within the region did not exactly become redundant, but neither did they take precedence over some of the crucial economic issues at hand. Perhaps what helped the general pace and

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<sup>6</sup> Kishore C Dash, no.1,p.100

<sup>7</sup> Declaration of the 7<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit held at Dhaka in 1992 <http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/07-Dhaka-7thSummit1993.pdf>, accessed on 29/2/2012

trajectory of the regional thrust was a more enlightened effort on part of some member countries to go in for closer bilateral and sub-regional cooperation. For example the 'Gujral doctrine' credited to then foreign minister of India I. K. Gujral emphasized on non reciprocity and unilateral concessions as the guiding spirit behind India's neighborhood policy. It was in this context the solution of the vexed issue of sharing of the Ganges River water between India and Bangladesh was arrived at. At the sub regional level, this was also the time when the idea of growth quadrangle in South Asia comprising of sub region of North-east India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh with cross border travel, trade, transport and energy provided the localized environment where a more pragmatic approach to cooperation rather than the unwieldy 'regional approach' could work.

The conducive political atmosphere came against the backdrop of a fairly decent rate of growth for most of the South Asian economies, where most of the countries of the region were lauded for the fairly stable pattern of growth they experienced as compared to their rather wobbly South East Asian neighbors which got affected a lot more from the Asian financial crisis of the late nineties. The pace of economic cooperation did appear to be gaining greater momentum compared to the previous decade although the practical results of the SAPTA did not show a very visible impact at the ground level. While the period did not see any meaningful push for the regional grouping by the two bigger members of the group, there wasn't really any conscious effort on their part to be seen as violators of the SAARC spirit. Pakistan, which has often been regarded as a reluctant partner in SAARC, despite bringing in the need for 'resolving the more contentious issues' in South Asia as a precursor to economic cooperation, preferred to remain on board on major SAARC decisions even though belatedly.<sup>8</sup>

The feeble steps towards economic cooperation notwithstanding, the general perception that SAARC remains under utilized in terms of its full potential due to persisting political bottlenecks remained. The Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) Report in 1999 while acknowledging the role played by the SAARC mechanism in giving a platform for informal political consultation and therefore some landmark breakthroughs, mentioned clearly that 'SAARC's achievements had fallen short of the aspirations and cooperation had been hampered by lack of political will and hampered by vicissitudes of political climate'.<sup>9</sup> What was most remarkable was the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit scheduled to held at Colombo during July, 1998 went on with a business as usual approach against the backdrop of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998. While the concerns relating to the environment arising out of nuclear tests by the two SAARC members did find a mention in the speeches of some smaller members, the reference to the new nuclear environment in South Asia was more conspicuous by its absence

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<sup>8</sup> Padmaja Murthy, Pakistan and SAARC, <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jan9-7.html>, accessed on 29/2/2012

<sup>9</sup> The GEP had been set up by the 9<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit to undertake a comprehensive review of the SAARC process in the first decade of its operation and suggest a vision for future. See SAARC 2000 and beyond: Report of the SAARC Group of Eminent Persons established by the ninth SAARC Summit, SAARC, Shipra Publications, New Delhi, 1999,p.10

in the Summit Declaration.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan proposed a Peace, Development and Security Initiative within SAARC, which could take up the bilateral contentious issues in the region in view of the recent security scenario in the region, holding lack of political dialogue as a major impediment to SAARC. But the same was refused by the other members.<sup>11</sup> In fact the Summit made more news for providing the opportunity to the two new nuclear rivals to share the dais for the first time after going nuclear, thus reinforcing the role of SAARC as a (latent) facilitator. Yet any expectations that SAARC process would henceforth become immune to the political tribulations of the region in the future were to remain short lived as the subsequent events were to show.

### **The Return of High Politics and the future of SAARC**

The turn of the new millennium and the last decade of SAARC's evolution in many ways marked the return of high politics in the region which have had a direct bearing on the pace and the performance of SAARC. The following trends are discernible as one takes the stock of the last decade in SAARC's evolution.

- a) *Unprecedented stalling of the SAARC process*: The tumultuous events at the turn of the century, which included the Kargil War, return of Military to Pakistan's politics, The unprecedented terrorist activities such as the Kandahar Hijack and the attack on the Indian Parliament, cumulatively created one of the most bitter phases in the context of India-Pakistan relationship and the fact that the two feuding neighbors would allow the spirit of the SAARC to enable them to meet again was a foregone conclusion. The SAARC process came to an abrupt halt as for nearly four years there was no summit of the SAARC held. The hiatus in many ways exploded the myth that one could take the 'political' as part and parcel of the process and get on with business as usual. The next Summit could only be held in Kathmandu in 2002 amidst evident tension between India and Pakistan and did not result in any major breakthrough.
- b) *India's dilemma in SAARC*: While India had never been perceived as a pro-active partner in SAARC, nor was it seen as the ultimate spoiler. India had by and large preferred to go along the major decisions that were taken at the SAARC summits, with occasional maneuverings behind the scenes that would lead to deferment or rescheduling of major SAARC events. But partly because of its own frustration at the lack of pace in the SAARC process and the relative attractiveness of extra regional economic linkages owing to its growing economic clout, India openly admitted its impatience with the SAARC process at one point of time.<sup>12</sup> However such a criticism was short lived as India took upon the

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<sup>10</sup> See the Declaration of the 10<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit at Colombo, <http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/10%20-%20Colombo%20-%2010th%20Summit%201998.pdf>, accessed on 29/2/2012

<sup>11</sup> John Cherian, A Low key Summit, Frontline, Vol. 15 :: No. 17 :: August 15 - 28, 1998 , <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1517/15170520.htm> accessed on 29/2/2012

<sup>12</sup> Speech by Foreign Secretary Mr. Shyam Sharan on India and Its Neighbours at India International Centre, 14th February, 2005, <http://www.indianembassy.org/prdetail1124/--foreign-secretary-mr.-shyam-saran%27s->

mantle of SAARC leadership at the 2007 Summit in New Delhi and tried to inject a lot more dynamism and purpose by proposing 'connectivity' as a major theme and followed it up by proposing to set up a number of infrastructural and transit facilities at the border areas to bring the idea of a South Asian union closer home.<sup>13</sup> Besides its proposal to host the first ever South Asian University was met with wider appreciation by all. Thus India's position remains a fairly nuanced one when it came to giving a priority to the SAARC matters even though it has had a reason to believe that the pace has been too slow.

- c) *SAARC in the global context*: Two developments in the recent years are bound to generate greater political interest in SAARC and therefore may raise the political stakes in the grouping for the outside world. First, the entry of Afghanistan into SAARC in 2007. While the need and rationale for Afghanistan to be in SAARC can hardly be overestimated, the larger geopolitical impact of the same still needs to be factored in. Though the latest entrant has not had a chance to host a SAARC summit yet, it remains to be seen how the grouping may remain immune to the political situation in one of its members as the foreign troops leave the territory in a couple of years time. Having taken in Afghanistan, all the SAARC members now have a collective stake in ensuring peace and stability in the country, but one is yet to see an effective SAARC statement reaffirming the same. In fact the emphasis has been more on perceiving the potential economic benefits that Afghanistan's coming in may offer by way of being a gateway to Central Asia and the source of gas supply.<sup>14</sup> The other development is the increasing countries which are now 'observing' SAARC. In the recent years there has been a spurt in countries given an observer status in SAARC ranging from United States of America to Iran and China.<sup>15</sup> While at present the guidelines for such status merely mentions possibilities of mutual cooperation between the association and observers, the political prism through which each of the nine countries would like to judge the SAARC, with their divergent interests cannot be ignored. India would remain wary of any heightened extra- regional interest in SAARC, while the other countries may see in it an opportunity for greater visibility and accomplishment for the grouping.
- d) *The Elusive Big Idea*: Finally, it would not be an exaggeration to say that SAARC remains in search of a 'big idea' which could redefine and reinterpret regionalism in South Asia. There have not been a dearth of ideas in SAARC, but they have remained conspicuous

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speech-on-andquot%3BIndia-and-its-neighboursandquot%3B-at-the-india-international-centre-%28iic%29, accessed on 29/2/2012

<sup>13</sup> Prime Minister's Speech at the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit at New Delhi, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=499> accessed on 29/2/2012

<sup>14</sup> Sudeshna Sarkar, Afghanistan comes in from the Cold, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch-Archive/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=53216>, accessed on 29/12/2012

<sup>15</sup> At present there are a total of nine observer countries in SAARC which include Australia, China European Union Iran Japan Republic of Korea Mauritius Myanmar and USA



by their declaratory value than practical one. One such idea could have been provided by the on-going global economic crisis which has apparently hit the South Asian economies in an equal measure. At a time like this SAARC could have moved a little away from the usual theme of 'togetherness in prosperity' to 'togetherness in crises' where greater collective mechanisms could have been provided to cushion the impact of economic recession in a concerted way. But such a thing could have come in only when there was a definite political vision in South Asia of meeting the challenge together and there happens to be none at the moment.

## **Conclusion**

How then does SAARC move forward to make the political and economic work together? It is the contention of the author that politics has defined the scope and contours of regional interaction in South Asia so far, so shying away from political intractables won't really do good to the nearly three decade old grouping. SAARC has seen too many ups and downs to be unsure of its ability to encourage greater opportunity for political dialogue at the multilateral level rather than at the sidelines. There is perhaps a case for opening a political window in the midst of the formal SAARC process with a clear provision that such deliberations would not be allowed to come in the way of core issues of economic cooperation. Such an approach encouraging 'soft' politics within SAARC may perhaps create a more credible environment for engagement in other areas of cooperation than has existed so far. But then all the members would have to be on board if this has to become a reality.