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POSTPONEMENT OF SAARC SUMMITS: AN ANALYSIS AND PROGNOSIS

Abstract

The idea of regionalism in South Asia was first mooted by Bangladesh and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) started functioning since December 1985. Though SAARC provided a hope to promote economic cooperation, the mistrust among the member states and lack of political will led to frequent postponements of SAARC summits from the very outset. The paper attempted to find out the causes of the postponements and analysed the background and different circumstances of rescheduling those summits. The paper also pointed out some political circumstances which could have led setback to SAARC but actually they did not. It argues that the organization is a victim of bilateral impediments and India's neighbourhood policy. It is also clear from the twenty years of SAARC process that if things do not conform to Indian interests, the postponements may recur. Finally the paper suggests some ways and means to avoid postponement of SAARC summit.

Introduction

South Asia has been for too long the only region in the world without any regional cooperative endeavour. The idea of regionalism was first mooted by Bangladesh in May 1980 and the South Asian

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Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) started functioning since December 1985. Lack of congenial atmosphere and mistrust among the states inhibited any attempt at regional cooperation in South Asia before. The rationale of the organization was grounded in an assumption that regional co-operation would generate better conditions to value what they have in common, and thus generate a climate of mutual trust and confidence to facilitate common efforts in economic, social and technological developments in these countries.¹ Thus SAARC provided a hope as it would sidetrack the political issues to enforce the economic cooperation among the member states. But unfortunately, hope of cooperation did not fully materialize for a number of reasons. Moreover, perpetual mistrust among the member states and lack of political will frequently led to postponement of SAARC summits from the very outset.

Following the principle of annual summitry, as laid down in the SAARC Charter there should have been 19 summits. But unfortunately in 20 years of SAARC history, there have been only 12 summits and eight of them were postponed having adverse impact on the institution of SAARC. Since initiation whatever the progress SAARC made eventually brought to a standstill by deferment on bilateral contentious issues. Annual summits of SAARC are not an assured event. Consequently, this organization failed to implement any meaningful plan uninterruptedly. Moreover, the postponements injected an unprecedented uncertainty on functioning, expectation, progress, and above all the future of SAARC.

Against this backdrop, the central purpose of the article is to explore ways and means to avoid adjournment of SAARC summit. More importantly, the objective is to extract lessons from the past postponements so that such incidents could be overcome. The discussion is expected to shed light on how find out opportunities to

¹ Masud Hossain, *Regional Conflict Transformation: A Reinterpretation of South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC)*, (INTREKONT BOOKS 11, Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki, 2002).

reschedule postponed summits at the earliest possible time. The paper first makes an attempt to review on the previous postponements and focus on the circumstances to reschedule delayed summits. Study of situations that could have led to postponement of SAARC summits but actually they did not will be instructive in developing regional capacity in ensuring an uninterrupted SAARC process.

SAARC Summit in Twenty Years: Postponements

It was clear from the very inception of SAARC that India-Pakistan relations would play an important role in the success or failure of the grouping.² Nevertheless, except the first deferral of 13th summit, India related issues played most significant role for all other postponements of SAARC summit. Again, this is the sixth time in the history of SAARC that India has caused deferment of summit and consistently cited 'regional political' turmoil as the reason for the set back. More fundamentally, the credibility of SAARC as an institution took a knocking from the fact that its leaders could not even meet every year as they had promised to themselves.³

First four SAARC summits were held on scheduled time but first incident of postponement came at the time of 5th summit (Table 1). The summit was supposed to be held in Colombo in 1989. But continuing presence of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka caused the consternation. On June 1, 1989 Sri Lankan President Premadasa demanded that Indian troops to leave within one month. But getting no response from India, Sri Lanka followed boycott diplomacy. As the President Premadasa said to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on a letter:

The withdrawal of the IPKF will also enable Sri Lanka to host the SAARC Summit in November this year in a climate of tranquillity. As you are aware, we could not undertake our

² See, Kalim Bahadur, "Politics of SAARC" *World Focus*, Vol.22, No.7, July 2001.

³ C.Raja Mohan, "The Twelfth Summit and the Future of SAARC", *BISS Journal*, Vol.25, No 4, October 2004.

obligation to do this in 1988. You will appreciate how difficult it is to a regional gathering of this nature with foreign farces on our soil. Our people are most enthusiastic about welcoming leaders of our own region, particularly our closest neighbours.⁴

Therefore, Sri Lanka had started the practice of postponing summit. It was postponed both in terms of venue and time, and was finally held in Male, Maldives on November 1990. In the Male summit, the Heads of State or Government gratefully accepted the offer of the Government of Sri Lanka to host the 6th SAARC summit in 1991.⁵

Again, the 6th summit failed to convene on its original schedule because of the non- appearance of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan, who cited domestic problem for not being able to attend the summit. But it was a widely accepted view that India wanted to embarrass host Sri Lanka because of Indo - Sri Lankan tension at that time. In an exclusive interview with *Asian Tribune* on 17 April 2005, Pakistani Ambassador and eminent political analyst M. F. Rahman Akbar said:

As the king of Bhutan expressed his inability to attend personally and instead nominated his Foreign Minister to represent him. India used the provisions of Article III of the SAARC Charter claiming that the Heads of State or Government could attend the summits only.⁶

Thus the summit was delayed for some days. Finally it was a one-day summit held in the Sri Lankan capital on 21st December 1991.

⁴ Texts of Letters Exchanged between Sri Lanka President Premadasa and India Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi June to July 1989. <http://www.tamilnation.org/intframe/india/89exchange.htm>, accessed on February 20, 2005.

⁵ See, The Male Declaration of the Heads of State or Government of the Member Countries of Asian Association for Regional Cooperation issued on 23rd November 1990.

⁶ See, http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=14099, accessed on March 4, 2005.

Table 1: Postponements of SAARC Summit since its Inception

Summit	Scheduled venue/date	Rescheduled venue/date	Initiator for postponement	Cause of postponement
5 th	Colombo, 1989	Male, 21-23 Nov-1990.	Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka's disapproval to host the summit because of presence of IPKF in the country.
6 th	Colombo 7-9 Nov. 1991	Colombo, 21st December, 1991	Bhutan	Domestic problem in Bhutan.
7 th	Dhaka, 12-13 December, 1992	Dhaka, 13-14 January, 1993	India	India's request to delay summit following "Ayodhya" incident.
7 th	Dhaka, 13-14 January, 1993	Dhaka, 10-11 April, 1993	India	Indian Prime Minister's inability to attend apparently due to internal problem.
8 th	New Delhi, in December, 1994	New Delhi, 2-4 May, 1995	India	State elections in India.
11 th	Kathmandu, 26-28 November 1999	Host Nepal proposed for December 28-30	India	New Delhi's objection on the presence of a military ruler, meaning Pakistan, among the South Asian heads.
11 th	Host Nepal proposed for December 28-30	Kathmandu, 4-6 January, 2002	India	India denied attending summit with a coup leader.
12 th	Islamabad, 11-13 January, 2003	4-6 January, 2004	India	India's precondition that it would only attend the summit if Pakistan end "cross border terrorism".
13 th	Dhaka, January, 2005	February, 2005	Sri Lanka	Indian Ocean tsunami
13 th	Dhaka, Feb. 2005	-	India	India's pull out because of security concern in their neighbourhood

Source: Compiled by the author based on various sources

The 7th SAARC summit was postponed twice by India because of the demolition of the historic Babri Mosque in India by fanatic Hindu fundamentalists on 6th December 1992 and the natural outburst of anger and condemnation against the incident by Muslims in Bangladesh and other countries in the sub-continent. Yet again, there was a speculation that threats by certain groups in Dhaka against Rao's visit made the Indian Prime Minister decide not to visit Dhaka for the summit. The summit eventually took place on April 10 and 11, 1993 in Dhaka. In the Dhaka summit, it was decided that New Delhi would host the 8th summit in December 1994. But it was postponed by India unilaterally on ground of upcoming Indian state elections. The summit was later held on May 2-4, 1995.

The military coup in Pakistan posed a serious dilemma for South Asian regional grouping. The 11th summit was planned on November 1999 in Kathmandu but India urged the chairperson of the meeting to defer the conference because of "concern and disquiet" over the coup. Sri Lanka along with Pakistan and Nepal initially were against the idea of deferment. But SAARC works by consensus and, thus, the situation was in India's favour. The chairperson announced the postponement of the summit on 6th November 1999. Accordingly, the session was delayed for two years because of a border conflict between Pakistan and India and the military coup that brought General Pervez Musharraf to power. The military coup in 1999 had led to Islamabad's suspension from the Commonwealth and India wanted to isolate Pakistan by putting off the SAARC summit. New Delhi justified the adjournment by expressing unwillingness to share the platform with Pakistan's Army regime. According to experts, the move was also tactical. As Kanti Bajpai said, "The gains are not immediate. Besides drawing world attention to cross-border terrorism, smaller countries in the region which do not have a strong democratic tradition will feel reassured".⁷ After two years of delay a three-day summit was held in 2002 ending long dilemmas over the

⁷ See: <http://ipripak.org/factfiles/ff17.shtml>, accessed on March 15, 2005.

meet, overshadowed by warlike situations between India and Pakistan.

The 12th SAARC summit, which was scheduled for January 2003 in Islamabad, was also postponed due to India-Pak tensions and blame game between the two for "sabotaging" SAARC meeting. The key reason for India's non-participation was because at the 11th summit President Musharraf raised the Kashmir dispute in the summit. Consequently, Indian officials feared that he would leave no stone unturned on raising Kashmir dispute at the summit he was to host. The then Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee alleged that Pakistan would try to turn the South Asian Summit into a forum for Kashmir, which was contrary to SAARC principle.⁸ India also put up a condition that it would participate in the summit only if Pakistan ended "cross border Terrorism".

The 13th SAARC summit has been delayed twice within a span of less than two months. The first postponement was due to the unfortunate Indian Ocean tsunami, which resulted in death of thousands of people and massive destruction of property in three SAARC member countries -India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The summit was rescheduled but was again postponed on 2nd February when the Indian Foreign Secretary announced that the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh would not attend the 13th SAARC summit in Dhaka on 6 -7 February 2005 considering the Royal coup in Nepal and uncertain security situation in the Bangladeshi capital.⁹ India came to the conclusion that "time is not propitious" for holding the summit. Analysts said that India's attendance in the Dhaka summit would have only legitimised King Gyanendra's assumption of executive power by ousting the elected government in Kathmandu. India did not like the idea that the King used the SAARC forum to secure legitimacy for his royal coup. Relation between New Delhi and Dhaka has also been strained in recent

⁸ *The Daily Star*, December 10, 2002.

⁹ Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary, Shri Shyam Saran, on February 2, 2005, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

months because of conflict over various bilateral disputes. It is argued that by blaming security concerns of Bangladesh, India wanted to diminish Bangladesh's image in the international arena. Hence, while development of Nepal was the prime reason for the postponement, the situation of Bangladesh was also mentioned as a reason, presumably following the deterioration of Bangladesh-India relations.

Rescheduling of Postponed SAARC Summits

From the above-mentioned causes for deferment of many SAARC Summits, it is clear that the organization is the victim of bilateral impediments. The author would argue that SAARC suffers obstruction because of India's neighbourhood policy. The fact that India is at the centre of nearly all outstanding problems and discords in the complex matrix of bilateral relations in the region is well-known and is also a part of the geo-political reality of the region.¹⁰ Rescheduling of those summits took place on different grounds under various circumstances. Sometimes, it was possible to hold summits linked either through mutual bilateral solutions or through mutually acceptable resolution of the event/issue that caused the postponement. But sometimes the summit took place without material change on the ground. In these cases the summit took place by self-initiative from India or by the pressure of external forces. In what follows, some of the ways in which the postponed summits were later held are outlined.

Rescheduling of Summit by Resolving Bilateral Dispute: The Indo-Sri Lankan crisis over IPKF withdrawal from Sri Lanka caused a serious obstruction to the SAARC process and mutual solution of that bilateral problem helped rescheduling that summit. That time the summit was rescheduled through India's withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka. On September 18, 1989, an accord was signed between India and Sri Lanka, under which India promised to withdraw her

¹⁰ See, Iftakharuzzaman "Bilateral Impediments to SAARC: The Indo-Sri Lanka Crisis over IPKF Withdrawal", *BISS Journal* Vol. 10, No. 3, 1989

troops from Sri Lanka by 31st December 1989. It was possible on two grounds: first, LTTE announced a cessation of hostility and agreed for dialogue with Sri Lankan government and secondly, it was probably coincidence that 1989 was an election year and probability of Rajiv Gandhi's re-election was by no means certain. Thus, Sri Lanka used SAARC summit as a bargaining tool to resolve bilateral problems and gained from it. India took that revenge deferring the 6th summit for some days where Sri Lanka was the host country. Interestingly, formally it was Bhutan's internal problem that led to the deferment of the summit.

Rescheduling the Summit after Subsidence of the Issue: Issues like Ayodhya incident in India and Indian Ocean tsunami led postponement of Summits. Those summits were rescheduled after taking time to settle those issues. The 7th summit was put off twice because of riots in Bombay and sporadic incidents that caused deaths and arsons after the Ayodhya incident. Again some subsequent events including Delhi's reactions on the discussion of Babri Mosque issue in Bangladesh Parliament made the prospects SAARC summit murkier. As the Indian State Minister for External Affairs, Mr. R.L.Bhatia told the newsman, "the situation in the region after the "Ayodhya" incident had not fully subsided and serious discussions about the SAARC were perhaps not possible at this stage. the atmosphere now is not right to hold the summit and deliberate on serious issues."¹¹ India took several months to reschedule the summit guided by two considerations: firstly, delaying tactics was preferred because almost a radical turn about was apparently an embarrassment to India and secondly, reaction to alleged riot against minorities in Bangladesh as a backlash to Ayodhya. Eventually India sought to reschedule the summit for April 1993.

Holding Summit without Changing the Ground: Indo-Pak conflict is considered the most critical constraint for the regionalism in South Asia. As it was envisaged, the conflict provided the major

¹¹ *The Bangladesh Observer*, January 11, 1993.

impediments to the regional grouping in the eve of 11th summit and it also delayed the 12th summit. However, unlike the other summits, summits were rescheduled without changing the ground of postponement. Rather, external pressure acted as catalysts of holding the summits.

Since nuclear tests by India and Pakistan a lot of events happened in the region. Kargil in 1999 was a war-like situation. Besides, there was intensification of the cross border war in Jammu and Kashmir. India was reluctant to attend the 11th summit in 2000 and 2001, as Vajpayee did not want to share a platform with Musharraf in the aftermath of the Kargil War.¹² But US interests and influence in the region enabled Nepal to hold summit in January 2002. As John Cherian said "The Bush Administration, which has acquired considerable clout in New Delhi in recent times, has been urging for a resumption of the dialogue process."¹³ The USA pressure on Pakistan and India to eschew war at any cost and the nuclear deterrence factor have definitely played a powerful pre-emptive role for the 11th summit. Again the Kargil war also made Musharraf almost friendless and loser in the international arena where as India got much support from US and other countries. To get rid out of it, Musharraf took initiatives to restore peace and tried to tackle the situation through SAARC summit. It was during the highly tense times and peak of enmity when President Musharraf unilaterally took decision to give peace a chance, going out of the war and made a handshake with former Prime Minister of India Atal Behari Vajpayee in the 11th SAARC summit.¹⁴

The postponement of 12th summit suffered the same fate - Indo-Pak conflict. Though Pakistan wanted to resolve the conflict, India was rigid in its position. However, India remained inflexible until

¹² John Cherian "Roadblock to a summit", *Frontline*, Vol.19, Issue 23, December 06, 2002

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sadia Nasir "Indian arrogance and SAARC summit", *Pakistan Times*, March 6, 2005.

another round of peace process commenced in November 2003. A process of improvement in Indo-Pak relations that became apparent since April 2003 led to the successful holding of the 12th SAARC summit during January 4-6, 2004 in Islamabad.¹⁵ It is very difficult to explain what led India to attend the 12th summit in Islamabad in January 2004, because apparently the ground reality of cross-border terrorism has not improved. However, India indicated that the situation of terrorism has improved. Moreover, it is likely that USA persuaded both India and Pakistan not to jeopardise the summit. This was preceded and followed by, largely behind the scene but intense, diplomatic efforts on the part of the US, which was displaying, over the recent years, a clear determination to push the two archrivals into a long -time rapprochement.¹⁶

More Possible Postponements: How were They Averted?

The political situation in South Asia is rather complex. There is no guarantee against the volatility of the political situation in the region. There are high potential issues for conflict and extremely little prospects for smooth cooperation and integration. In addition to actual postponements, a number of occasions arose when the summits could have been postponed but actually this did not happen. An understanding of these instances could help inject elements of resilience in the SAARC process

When the sixth SAARC summit took place in Colombo in 1991 and the 10th Summit took place there again in 1998, Sri Lanka could certainly not be called a place region free from political turmoil and violence.¹⁷ The LTTE allegedly caused the assassination of Rajiv

¹⁵ A. K. M Abdus Sabur, "Security Scenario in South Asia: An Overview", paper presented at the seminar on South Asian Security and Sino-Bangladesh Relations organized by BIIS on 02 March 2005.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Guest column by Geeta Madhavan, "SAARC: India's Rubik Cube", source: <http://www.saag.org/papers13/paper1247.html#top>, accessed on March 9, 2005.

Gandhi in 1991.¹⁸ However, at that point of time, Prime Minister Shri Narasimha Rao attended the summit in Colombo.

Similarly in 1998, the 10th summit was held in Colombo from July 29-31, against the backdrop of the nuclear tests by two of its members, India and Pakistan. No one had expected two rival nuclear powers to come so close in such a short span of time after a fiercely heightened tension.¹⁹ But the nuclear tests of both countries and the resultant tension in the region did not derail the Colombo summit. Moreover, during that period LTTE continued its activities and there were several urban suicide bombings and naval attacks.²⁰ Again, it was said in the Indian print media that the intelligence agencies had advised Vajpayee not to travel Colombo for SAARC summit. The summit provided the first face-to-face meeting between the two prime ministers, Nawaz Sharif and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. This could be, as analysts believe, that both of them have been under domestic and external pressures not to be seen to vitiate the Summit environment.²¹ A European diplomat commented during that time, "The primary focus will be on the attitude, pronouncements and postures of the two leaders relating to their 'nuclear stand'. Also on whether they would evolve a formula for assuring their neighbours in the region and outside world about putting unilateral moratorium on future tests and make commitments that they would not go ahead with nuclear weaponisation programme"²² The 10th summit provided the much needed opportunity for the two prime Minister of India and Pakistan to have direct dialogue between them and have their pulses felt for the first time in the aftermath of nuclearisation of the region.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Mahendra P. Lama "SAARC: The Future Ahead", *World Focus*, Vol.25, No.6, June 2004.

²⁰ Madhavan, *op. cit.*

²¹ Barrister Harun ur Rashid, "Colombo SAARC Summit: An Appraisal" *The Daily Star*, August3, 1998

²² *The Daily Star*, July 18, 1998.

The terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 unleashed a military confrontation between New Delhi and Islamabad and drew much of the world into preventing its escalation in an actual war.²³ It was not certain till the end whether the then Prime Minister of India; Atal Bihari Vajpayee would attend it...²⁴ Though, the 11th summit suffered postponement at least for two years but finally, it was held in a turbulent environment. In spite of troop mobilization on the Indo-Pak border in the aftermath of the December 13, 2001 11th summit held in Kathmandu.

There is no denying of the fact that the preparation for the Islamabad summit took place in one of the most difficult periods of contemporary South Asian history.²⁵ The 12th summit took place despite two attempts on the life of the President of Pakistan. This underlined the importance of SAARC process. Some degree of uncertainty did exist surrounding the summit even at the last stage as host Pakistan was convulsing from a second attempt on the life of President Musharraf at the heart of the capital rising security concerns for the attending leaders. But finally, the heads of government meeting took place and it went off quite satisfactorily. Islamabad documents show that the 12th summit was different from the earlier summit in more than one ways, the most prominent one being the fact that Indo-Pakistan relationship became a facilitator, rather than a stumbling block.²⁶

Conclusion

Assessment of SAARC's performance and relevance vary from optimistic to pessimistic point of views. But both the optimists and

²³ C Raja Mohan, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Kalim Bahadur, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Mohan, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Mohammed Mohsin "Vision of SAARC in the Third Decade- A Perspective" *BISS Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4, October 2004.

pessimists unanimously agree that frequent postponement of SAARC summit is the main bottleneck for ineffectiveness of the regionalism in South Asia and it will gradually deteriorate at the point of nadir. Therefore, assuring well functioning environment for SAARC should be the first priority to these countries. We should carefully follow reasons of past deferments and rearrangement of those and obtain lessons in order to steer clear of such unexpected incidence of postponement. Again, summits those could be postponed but did not have serious repercussion for the region.

From previous discussions, it is clearly observed that some factors which could put off one summit, could not delay another. For example, LTTE was considered responsible for the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi but Prime Minister Narasimha Rao attended the Colombo summit in 1991 and Prime Minister Vajpayee attended 12th Summit in Islamabad after two attempts on the life of President Musharraf. But Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not attend 13th summit excusing security concern. Again Aydhoya incident led 7th summit postpone twice but terrorist attack in Indian parliament did not hinder the schedule of the 11th summit. Hence, it appears that the reasons for the past postponements are the lack of political will and sincerity. It is also significant that now postponement of summit has become a tool to take revenge against political enemies. Again rescheduling of the postponed summits had a trend till 7th summit where rescheduling of those were related to resolving the events or solution of bilateral disputes. But it is evident since 10th summit that the holding of summit is rather related to external pressure than mutual understanding of the member states.

According to Article 1(d), the Heads of State/ Government would meet once a year or more if necessary. But this provision is distorted mostly and only six times they could meet once a year. Now, Summit is a biennial affair. Again, there is no provision of postponing summit but it occurred ten times. However, Article X (1) prescribes to take decision on the basis of unanimity. But it was found only for the first postponement of 13th summit. Moreover, most of the postponements that initiated by India were because of its

suspicion about its neighborhood and unilateral feeling to wait for suitable time to participate summit. Again, there is also difference between India and other members on identifying internal affair of a country and regional concerns as well. These things also need to resolve for the viability of the organization. But regional cooperation in SAARC can not make steps forward in attaining the objectives enshrined in its Charter unless true efforts are made to promote believe in and abide by Charter. And it is the high time to pay attention to the structural flaw of SAARC in its constitution. To avoid postponements some steps could be taken:

- From the very outset of this regional integration member countries do not believe on its Charter. Thus, there should have some strict measures to avoid such confusion.
- SAARC members can settle for a permanent venue and fix a time for holding summit. The venue can be the Secretariat of Nepal and, thus, it is possible to avoid unexpected circumstances.
- Now the decision making process in SAARC is bases on unanimity. Thus each member state has the veto power and they use this power to postpone summit. To avoid it, there would have democratic voting system in decision-making, thus, decision would be taken on majority votes.
- The Secretary General has no role for holding the summit. It is necessary to empower the secretariat so that it provides greater efficiency in coordination of annual summit of the Head of Government/State. If any member seeks to delay the summit, then the secretariat will draw attention of other member states and, accordingly, will take decision.
- In the Charter there is no provision for postponement. But with the past experience there would have some guideline so that if any of the member country seeks postponement then

what would be the procedure and if postponement occurs what would be the time limit to reschedule that summit.

- Clauses should be inserted so that summit will continue despite the failure of one country to participate.

Finally, we should promote “accommodative diplomacy” to make SAARC process successful. As India has more economic options than any other countries of SAARC, it is our best interest to make SAARC process alive. So, instead of being mere talk shops, SAARC should put more attention in its functional aspects rather than the ceremonial ones. Bangladesh is the initiator of SAARC. Therefore, she has the moral obligation to make it working.