MANAGING INTRA-GROUP CONFLICTS IN ASEAN: RELEVANCE FOR SAARC

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Introduction

Intra-group tensions and conflicts are inevitable experiences in regional groupings, especially those in the Third World regions. The survival and growth of the grouping depend much on how the conflicts are dealt with. While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) remains a forerunner among the successful regional groupings in terms of forging a regional identity and achieving progress in co-operative endeavours, its methods of dealing with regional tensions and conflicts side by side with co-operation process remains a less researched area, especially for scholars coming from relatively new and less successful groupings like the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC).

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Following a number of unsuccessful and short-lived experiments with regionalism, the ASEAN was launched in 1967 amidst deep-seated mistrust and numerous conflicts among the member-states. Moreover, avenues for conflict management and co-operation had virtually collapsed in the preceding years under the weight of, among others, the Indonesian policy of Konfrontasi towards Malaysia (1963-66), the Philippines claim on Sabah, and the separation of Singapore from Malaysia and its aftermath. Therefore, the management and resolution of intra-group conflicts emerged as a *sine qua non* for the very survival of ASEAN not to speak of its success. This compelled ASEAN to concentrate considerable efforts on the reduction of tension and suspicion as well as promotion of reconciliation among the member-states with a view to facilitating the main purpose of the grouping, viz. mutually beneficial regional co-operation. In this regard, its achievements are remarkable. These include improvement in Malaysia-Indonesia and Malaysia-Singapore relations, the resuscitation of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Philippines in 1969, the rapid improvement in Brunei-Indonesia and Brunei-Malaysia relations since 1981, and containment of friction between Malaysia and Thailand.

Over the years, ASEAN has developed a set of mechanisms and processes for the management of intra-group conflicts. These mechanisms and processes are rather disparate and operate through a complex interactive process. By way of tentative typology, these may be described as *consultation* (formal or informal, bilateral or multi-lateral), *negotiation/mediation* (bilateral or multi-lateral), third-party mediation and arbitration.

These mechanisms and processes have successfully facilitated the management of intra-ASEAN disputes through bilateral and/or multilateral dialogues, and thus,
enabling ASEAN to neutralise the damaging impact of bilateral disputes on the process of regional co-operation to the extent that from its modest beginning in 1967, it emerged as the most successful experiment in regional co-operation in the developing world. An insight into the varieties of these mechanisms and the process of their working has more than academic value.

The hopes generated by the emergence of SAARC that South Asia, so long torn by strives, may finally be moving towards a co-operative framework are turning to be a despair due to deep-seated mistrust, divergent security perspectives and numerous perennial bilateral conflicts prevailing among the member states. Notwithstanding tremendous pressure from within the region as well as those created by the ongoing transformation of world economy and international relations, SAARC remained far from initiating an effective process of managing intra-regional conflicts. Moreover, the organisation is suffering from recurrent crises, occasionally, paralysing its activities. Numerous attempts to make a breakthrough are far from yielding desired results. Thus, with SAARC beset with numerous bilateral conflicts, an inquiry into the ASEAN way of conflict management may prove to be a rewarding exercise.

It is in this backdrop that a study on the ASEAN experiences of the management and resolution of intra-group conflicts with a view to examining its relevance for SAARC would be of significant academic as well as practical importance.

**ASEAN Way of Managing Intra-Group Conflicts: Relevance for SAARC**

As it is evident from the experiences of ASEAN member-states, domestic context played the decisive role in the
radical transformation of the foreign policies of these countries which allowed them to initiate a radical shift away from conflict to a course of co-operation in inter-state relations. The formation of ASEAN coincided with the time when its member states were gradually embarking upon highly ambitious programmes of socio-economic development. The grandiose programmes undertaken by them during the late 1960s and 1970s, were designed to face the challenges thrown by the underdevelopment, poverty, inequality, deprivation, and more importantly, consequential socio-political turmoil compounded by the communist threat from across the border. With the escalation of the process of nation building, more and more efforts were required to concentrate to ensure the utmost success of this process. In course of time, this generated increasing stakes in a friendly neighbourhood. This served as the main source of restraint and preparedness to accommodate as displayed by the ASEAN countries in relation to bilateral conflicts. A sheer cost benefit analysis of conflict and co-operation gradually led to the diminishing influence of factors and forces, which encouraged abrasive foreign policy like the practice of Konfrontasi. Thus, the tasks of foreign policy of ASEAN countries with regard to conflict and co-operation in the region were determined by their tasks at the domestic front.

While the process was not uniform in all the countries, and was accompanied by zigzags and occasional setbacks, in course of time, it generated increasing stakes in the creation and sustenance of a peaceful regional order under the auspices of ASEAN. Even the Philippines, where emotionally-charged Sabah issue used to generate considerable nationalist passion, and Malaysia, which found itself bogged down in conflicts with almost all of its ASEAN
partners, gradually learnt the wisdom in searching for a compromise solution to the disputes with the neighbours.

In terms of socio-economic underdevelopment, high concentration of poverty, inequalities, deprivation and consequential political turmoil, the conditions in South Asia have been much worse than in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, no SAARC country has ever displayed the vision of undertaking any programme of socio-economic development of the scale comparable to those undertaken by the ASEAN countries. As a consequence, in terms of the level of socio-economic development and the standard of living, South Asian countries began to fall behind more and more countries. The process started somewhere in the 1960s and is continuing unabated. By now, South Asia has fallen far behind all the world regions baring drought-suffering Africa.

This has affected the regional politics in South Asia with regard to conflict and co-operation in two ways. First of all, with no large-scale programme of socio-economic development, South Asian countries traditionally had no or very little stake in a friendly neighbourhood. Whether conflict or co-operation, it makes little difference. Second, South Asia's failure in socio-economic development and consequential socio-political turmoil created a constant pressure on the ruling elites to redirect mass grievances. As the experiences suggest, public display of intransigence on the issues of bilateral disputes with the neighbours, occasionally, even artificial escalation of such conflicts emerged as the most convenient means of serving this purpose. Thus, in stark contrast to ASEAN countries where the ruling elites justify their legitimacy on the ground of economic performance, the ruling elites in South Asia have developed a habit of justifying political legitimacy through cultivating nationalist passion, often chauvinism, and not seldom, jingoism directed against the neighbours. In
addition to serving as the main source of intransigence as displayed by the SAARC countries in relation to intra-group conflicts, this has also constantly vitiated the inter-state relations in the region.

Therefore, in order to initiate a decisive shift away from conflict to a course of co-operation in the region, it is an imperative for the SAARC countries to undertake radical programmes of socio-economic development capable of shifting the focus of attention from politics to economics at the national level. This would create high stake in a friendly neighbourhood. In fact, an economic process is already in the offing in South Asia that is marked by a remarkable shift away from regulated economy to one relying on the interaction of market forces. This is also being accompanied by rather forceful attempts to liberalise the economies of the regional countries opening them to the outside world. Whether and how far this process would gain momentum and would be capable of shifting the national focus away from politics to economics at the regional level still remains open questions.

As the ASEAN experiences suggest, such a transformation at the national level allows a regional grouping to manage intra-group conflicts properly and create a peaceful regional order even without any dramatic success in regional economic co-operation. It is very important for South Asia. Regional economic co-operation, even with the assumed success of SAPTA and prospective SAFTA, is unlikely to achieve any dramatic breakthrough, particularly in the crucial area of intra-regional trade. SAPTA and SAFTA are likely to allow the region to formalise already prevailing high volume of informal trade. Beyond that, the scope for the expansion of intra-regional trade is very limited. The simple reason is the lack of complementarity among the regional economies. This,
however, should not deter the prospects of SAARC. Neither there is any reason for setting high intra-regional trade targets and work on it forcefully through policy interventions. Such an attempt may succeed only at very high costs to the economies of SAARC countries.

Instead, the SAARC countries have a much better alternative. Over the recent years, they are making persistent efforts, though with varying degree of intensity, to take the advantages offered by the contemporary international division of labour through cultivating global trade and investment connections. This is the area where the focus of attention of the SAARC countries should be shifted to, while leaving the level of intra-regional trade and other forms of economic co-operation primarily, though not exclusively, to the market forces to determine.

Such a situation, instead of undermining the viability of SAARC, would make its existence even more indispensable for the member-states. As the SAARC countries would move to the international market to cultivate trade, investment and other forms of economic connections, they would inevitably need certain degree of cohesion and co-operation among themselves on the issues of significant concern to them. No less important, they would also need to project a collective positive image to the outside world in order to attract international attention in terms of economic co-operation. All these are certain to create tremendous pressure on the SAARC countries to resolve, or at least, properly manage numerous conflicts among themselves as was the case with ASEAN.

Among the concrete issues which serves the main source of suspicion and consequential divergence in security perspectives of the SAARC countries is the persistence of a big power-small power syndrome. At the centre of it remains India’s natural pre-eminence in the
region and New Delhi’s occasional attempts to transform this natural pre-eminence into an imposed predominance. The asymmetry of power in the region is an objective reality that can not be changed. What can be changed is the perception of India towards its neighbours and vice-versa. To this, the experiences of ASEAN in dealing with a similar phenomenon can serve as an example, though not a model.

Indonesia’s policy towards its neighbours, at times, even has been more abrasive than the Indian one. Nonetheless, ASEAN could find out a common ground where Indonesia’s regional ambitions and consequential security concerns could be accommodated. In this regard, the role of Indonesia, particularly the farsightedness and political acumen as displayed by its leadership, played the decisive role. Indonesia gradually, made it a conscious policy to exchange its erstwhile role of a regional troublemaker for that of a constructive partner. Particularly, in dealing with intra-group conflicts, Indonesia displayed a high degree of restraint and caution so as to remove the deep-seated suspicion in the mind of its ASEAN partners with regard to Jakarta’s hegemonic ambitions in the region. Political self-denial on the part of Indonesia gave ASEAN remarkable political ballast from the very outset and contributed significantly to the normalisation of politico-security environment in the region.

A similar role played by India may produce the same results in the context of SAARC. In this regard, the recent changes in Indian policy, its reconciliatory stance on the disputes with the neighbours and attempts to replace the India Doctrine with the Gujral doctrine are positive signs. Particularly, I. K. Gujral’s expressed determination not to be
prisoners of the past and to "get rid of the old mind-set quickly" are encouraging promises.

The new Indian policy towards South Asia still remains at the early stage of its development. Meanwhile, uncertainty looms large on how far the BJP led coalition government would or could go in accommodating the differences with the smaller neighbours. The influence of the forces and factors which encouraged such a policy remains fluid. To transform the current policy into a long-standing one the cultivation of elite cohesion in its support is indispensable. This would remain a difficult undertaking largely due to the deep-rooted urge in Indian mind to play a dominant role in the regional affairs. Thus, while the policy deserves serious consideration, whether it would led India to a political self-denial as practised by Indonesia in the ASEAN region still remains a question. However, something of the kind is a sine qua non for making a breakthrough in the prevailing environment of mistrust and conflict in the SAARC region.

Similarly, the smaller South Asian countries as well need to reconsider their policy towards India. First of all, they need to remain prepared to respond to any radical change that may take in Indian policy towards the region. South Asian reality and ASEAN experiences amply suggest that the management of inter-state conflicts and their ultimate resolution require considerable sacrifices on the part of all the parties concerned. While pressing for concessions from India, smaller South Asian countries also will have to devise ways and means of accommodating some of India's regional aspirations. That does not necessarily involve any sacrifice of jealously guarded national sovereignty. Indonesia's smaller neighbours have conveniently accommodated some of its regional aspirations without sacrificing their core concerns. In the changed
circumstances, highly vigilant smaller South Asian countries need to be more visionary in dealing with India.

With regard to the concrete issues of intra-group conflicts, SAARC, either consciously or unconsciously, has taken an approach that is theoretically more or less similar to that of ASEAN. Both the groupings have cautiously kept the respective organisations above the regional conflicts without assigning them any formal task in conflict management. While in 1976, ASEAN, indeed, assumed such tasks formally, in practice, conflict management within the grouping remained basically informal. Both the groupings also set the objective conservatively putting the main thrust on avoiding crises and managing conflicts as their resolution in the immediate future were considered unattainable. Both intended to achieve their objectives through negotiations at the bilateral levels.

In practice, however, the management of intra-group conflicts within these two groupings differed markedly, both in style and substance. The extent of the involvement of Indonesia and Thailand in defusing the crisis precipitated by the revelation of the Corregidor Affairs, and subsequently, in the management of the conflict over Sabah as well as the use of ASEAN forums for this purpose virtually transformed the management of conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines into an ASEAN joint venture, though the banner of ASEAN was never used. This is not a lone example. On many occasions, ASEAN forums were used by the member-states to discuss and settle differences among themselves. ASEAN countries, while have been no less cautious in keeping the Association above all sorts of controversy, they have also been highly innovative in devising various means and ways of using the ASEAN for the purpose of managing
intra-group conflicts. In case of SAARC, caution has rarely been accompanied by such innovation. In a regional grouping where the process of co-operation is strictly segregated from the management of intra-group conflicts, such innovative approaches on the part of its members are indispensable for the effective functioning of the grouping.

In contrast to ASEAN, negotiations at the bilateral level in SAARC are highly publicised and quite formal. The very process itself creates tremendous pressure on the leadership, as it is to remain always concerned about the domestic audience. During the whole process of negotiations, the parties remain highly vigilant. This often circumscribes the ability of the leadership to make even such compromises on the issues of bilateral conflicts, which could be rationalised in the light of long-standing interests of the nation. This is not to suggest to do away with transparency in the conduct of foreign policy or to strike deals over the heads of the people. Because, due to the high degree of political activism, passionate attachment of the virtually entire politically active populace to the issues of bilateral disputes with the neighbours and a free-to-write but highly partisan press as prevailing in South Asia, such attempts are likely to produce adverse consequences.

Nonetheless, ASEAN way of conducting informal and, when it is required, behind-the-scene negotiations at different levels certainly have got relevance for the SAARC countries. Despite some difficulties as mentioned above, it is not impossible to create numerous channels of communication among the SAARC countries to conduct informal or semi-official negotiations. Such negotiations allow expressing one's own position with more candour and understanding each other's positions better. Such exchanges, over a period of time and through different
channels, generate sensitivity to each other's predicaments, and ultimately, contribute to the amelioration of differences on the issues of bilateral dispute. Such practices may considerably reduce the strain on the formal meetings and negotiations, and significantly contribute to their success. With a view to improving the prevailing negotiation culture, excessively cautious and vigilant SAARC countries need to be more innovative and visionary while keeping in mind what is feasible and practical.

'Mixed' or unofficial processes for bilateral consultation organised by ASEAN-recognised Institutes of Strategic and International Studies and participated by high government officials, including ministers, along with the representatives from academia, media and business proved to be highly fruitful in discussing and bridging the differences on the sensitive bilateral issues. The process in the SAARC region remains far less developed. More importantly, academic endeavours have very little connections with or implications for the policy formulation. Integration of official efforts aimed at ameliorating differences with similar efforts by the academic and other professional circles is a necessary prerequisite for easing the process of conflict management.

To put the whole issue in a nutshell, as the disputes and conflicts are likely to remain as a long-standing phenomenon of inter-state relations in South Asia and, for their proper management, there can be no alternative to consultation and negotiation, it is an imperative for the region to devise ways and means for effective dialogue among the regional countries. As discussed, such a process of dialogue facilitated by numerous channels of communication is effectively operative in ASEAN. The issue has already received wide attention on the part of academia in South Asia. In a highly authoritative study conducted by
a group of eminent South Asian scholars and diplomats, and also participated by a number of outside scholars dealing with the regional affairs, it was proposed to initiate a process of political dialogue at academic, official and political levels with a view to addressing the question of stability and security in the region. The emphasis was put on uninterrupted institutionalised and structural dialogue at the regional level. Pending decisions in regard to dialogue at the official level, it was proposed that creative dialogue could be organised at the unofficial level on the basis of the work that has already been done at the academic level. The study also suggested that "mechanisms for confidence-building and conflict resolution should be identified as a result of such dialogues and consensus should be reached on conceiving a process that will tackle a flow of problems by taking into account the present and future interests of various parties and not on the basis of past rigid positions". The idea deserves serious consideration.

In comparative perspective, the issues of intra-group conflicts in South Asia are more in number and the differences between the conflicting parties on most of these issues are greater than the case with ASEAN. Therefore, they are likely to persist even a longer period than the ASEAN ones. In the circumstances, for the SAARC countries, the necessity of learning to leave with conflicts through effective measures of conflicts management is a more pressing necessity than it was for the ASEAN countries. However, some of the issues of bilateral disputes in the SAARC region impinge upon the vital issues, or so to speak, survival imperatives of some countries, and hence, require early solution. One of such issues, for instance, is the dispute over the sharing of Ganges water between Bangladesh and India. In the
circumstances, like ASEAN, SAARC as well needs to compartmentalise its intra-group conflicts in accordance with its own priorities. More pressing issues could be brought to the forefront for an early solution, while some others could be left for a later period. This would facilitate the systematisation of the disputes for their settlement according to priority and reduce considerable strain on the process of conflict management.

The process of co-operation, like that of conflict, at a certain stage of its development, generates dynamism of its own, which becomes difficult to reverse. Because, both the processes in the way of their development, create necessary material as well as emotional-psychological ground for their sustenance. ASEAN, in the way of its transformation from conflict to co-operation, has created such foundations as a result of which the process of regional co-operation under its framework has achieved sustainability. SAARC can not settle for less. However, the achievements of ASEAN are an outcome of inexhaustible efforts employed during a quite difficult, at times, even turbulent, period of transition. Considering the current difficulties and, the factors and forces sustaining them, it could be safely spelt out that South Asia’s transition from conflict to co-operation is likely to be even more difficult than was the case with ASEAN. Therefore, to achieve the objectives, South Asia will have to employ inexhaustible efforts and cultivate enormous patience for a continuously long period.

Concluding Remarks

The rich experiences of ASEAN in the successful management of intra-group conflicts, particularly as an effective mechanism for conflict management and discreet,
but highly skilful, diplomatic practices prevailing in the region, serve as a source of inspiration as well as learning for the SAARC in its efforts to manage conflicts among the member-states. However, this must be weighed against the backdrop of the fact that while there are some similarities in the historical experiences, socio-economic and politico-cultural life of the two regions, the differences between them in terms of political culture, diplomatic practices, socio-economic life, moral-cultural values, convictions and prejudices are also considerably great. Therefore, while the experiences of ASEAN deserve serious consideration, the SAARC countries will have to evolve a workable mechanism for the management of intra-group conflicts and devise appropriate diplomatic practices through their collective efforts taking into account the prevailing socio-economic, politico-cultural and geo-strategic reality in the region as well as the interaction of the region in all these respects with the outside world. This remains a highly difficult undertaking. Its success would require, on the part of the countries concerned, to employ inexhaustible efforts and display enormous patience, a very high degree of creativity and innovation, and above all, sincerity and goodwill. In this regard, the role of the leadership of the region, particularly its ability to project a wide vision for the future and display wisdom, sagacity and political acumen, would be of crucial importance in any possible transition of South Asia from conflict to a course of co-operation through effective measures of conflict management.