TRACK-II DIPLOMACY AS A MEASURE OF CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

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Introduction

SAARC, even after seventeen years of its existence, has not been able to catch the imagination of the peoples of South Asia. It is still perceived to be an intergovernmental organisation with very little creativity and enthusiasm. The growing cynicism and demoralisation around SAARC on the one hand and lofty dream of recovering the South Asian identity/personality through this regional body by the ordinary people on the other remains to be a puzzle which deserves to be investigated in-depth. The South Asians feel betrayed when they look around and find most regional groupings, particularly neighbouring ASEAN flourishing so well. The continuous success of European Union in regional integration pains them more when they compare it with the inability of SAARC in making any difference, however, modest that may be, in running the affairs of the region. The regional body has impacted very little on the flow of intra-regional trade, which is normally taken as one effective indicator of regional economic co-operation. While the average share of intra-regional flows in case of ASEAN was 22 percent in exports and 15 percent in imports in
the 1990s, the corresponding share in case of SAARC was 4 percent and 3.5 percent respectively (Raipura, 2002, p.3581). The ASEAN Free Trade (AFTA) was supposed to be launched in 2008. But the South East Asian leaders advanced it by 6 years and launched it in January 2002. The objective of AFTA is having almost all the goods (95%) traded within 0-5 percent tariffs (averaging 3.2%). This contrasts very badly with South Asian reality of 30% tariff plus plethora of non-tariff barriers. ASEAN is also moving fast in freeing up the trade in service sector with the aim to integrate the region with a combined GDP of nearly equal to that of China. They are also working hard to do away with non-tariff barriers and harmonise trade nomenclatures to make trade expedient and efficient. But South Asia is not yet ready for the SAFTA. The question of regional integration is not even in the agenda, even though the South Asian economy benefited from its complementarities that existed during the British and earlier rules (Rahman, 1992).

When the region fails to run airflights between the capitals and modest train connection Samjhauta Express between India and Pakistan it speaks volume about the supremacy of mindless politics over people's concerns. That does not mean SAARC has not done anything in changing the status quo. Surely a certain amount of 'social capital' (trust) has been generated in South Asia following expert and committee meetings, NGO meetings, the contacts at regular intervals due to SAARC Summits (RIS, 1998/99). However, people's desire for substantive co-operation in the field of developing natural resources, human resources and infrastructures remains unsatiated. The specific areas of co-operation in the fields of natural gas, water resource, port/water ways, transportation, communication and hydro power remain to be explored for
regional/sub-regional co-operation. The vast areas of service sectors and human development opportunities have remained out of focus of co-operation.

It is in this context that this paper argues for further confidence building in South Asia through Track-II diplomacy where people matter. The paper covers three areas of this people to people co-operation: (a) the integrating factors, (b) the constraining factors and (c) possible areas of non-governmental interventions.

**Integrating Factors**

The regional communities like European Union and ASEAN flourished for a number of integrative factors.

**Political Will**

The political will of the leaders of these regions to come together despite differences in size, level of development and security perception was substantial. The move towards a common goal of enlarging the regional market for intra-regional and as well as inter-regional trade was a conscious choice of the leadership. This has been not only missing in South Asia, at times the leaders have been helping dissipate whatever good will and energy for mutual co-operation may have been still left as residue. The biggest harm has been done to South Asian co-operation by Indo-Pakistan conflict. SAARC could never take off. People felt betrayed because of the prevailing perceptions arising out of this Indo-Pak tension. There is a strong perception in the region that India fears 'gang-up' by smaller states including Pakistan and hence does not encourage SAARC to grow. Yet there is another view that Pakistan wants to stall the progress of the Association because it fears that India will dominate it. The smaller
states, of course, find themselves caught in between these two perceptions and hesitate to go either very near to India or keep away from it. In that sense Indo-centric perception is still haunting most of the South Asian states including Pakistan, which is acting as a brake against natural growth of the South Asian Community. The political will among South Asian leaders has been particularly lacking in short-circuiting these perceptions for a greater cause of improving the lot of South Asian timid millions through effective co-operation. The only exception was the relatively short interlude of Gujral rule in India when the South Asians began to break most barriers to come together. Even the Indo-Pak tensions began to ease. Indo-Bangladesh relationship reached a new height and two most pressing problems of Chittagong Hill Tract ethnic crisis and the Ganges Water Sharing were tackled up front. All this created an atmosphere of mutual trust among both the leaders and the people of the region as well. However, this was a short-lived period of peace and harmony in South Asia. With the fall of Gujral Government in India, the 'Gujral Doctrine' began to eclipse pretty fast. Indeed, the subsequent regimes both in India and its neighbours opted for completely reversing the good will created among neighbours in the Gujral period. And the process of divisiveness has been further accentuated in recent periods leading to creating SAARC almost a non-entity.

Social Acceptability

The economic integration of a region has to be preceded by social acceptability of the regional personality both among elites and the people. South Asia had a common past, a common heritage and culture (Hasan in South Asian Regional Dialogue, 1994). The contemporary
leaders of South Asia need to revive that commonness among its people as has been done in both Europe and South East Asia. They too need their version of civilisation. This is a very slow process and at times quite difficult. But farsighted leaders must arouse consciousness about the virtue of regional co-operation among both ordinary people and opinion makers.

**Mutual Benefits**

A strong regional co-operation will never be effective unless both people and their leaders can comprehend the mutual benefits of coming together. Unless the comparative advantage of intra-regional trade is realised by the leaders of trade in the member countries and until the cost of non-co-operation is calculated by the elites of each member country, SAARC will remain a far cry (RIS, op cit.).

**Globalisation**

Globalisation has been proceeding at such a pace that unless South Asian states act together there is every possibility that they will be left behind by the fast-moving train refuelled by WTO. However, as yet South Asia has not been able to act together, even in terms of articulating common ills like poverty while dealing with global leaders who are setting the tunes of future trade, environment, poverty reduction throughout the world.

There are obviously serious constraints against South Asian co-operation. Some of these constraining factors have already been hinted at (Rahman, op cit. and Sobhan, 1994). Let us point out these factors more explicitly.
Constraining Factors

A number of factors are constraining the materialisation of the potentials of South Asian regional co-operation. Some of these factors are:

1) Indo-centric strategic perception both among India's neighbours and as well as big players of global diplomacy (Rahman, 1985).

2) Lack of trust among South Asian elites.

3) Weak financial position reflected through trade imbalances of smaller states vis-à-vis large state like India encourages the former to go for extra-regional trade and aid arrangements.

4) Poor infrastructure negates greater amount of intra-regional trade.

5) The leaders have obviously been not making serious cost benefit analysis to visualise the cost of non-co-operation and benefits of co-operation (RIS, op cit).

6) The citizens too are caught up in the cobweb of history (Sobhan, 1988). They are still victims of traumatic transition to new national entities from a larger entity and the tragedies of communal violences, loss of wealth and identities, which followed the end of colonial rule. As a result, they have not yet been able to generate sufficient demand for co-operation within their own countries. However, a number of exchanges have taken place between various groups of enlightened citizens showing enough room for optimism for developing a peaceful South Asian community. But high hopes raised by these groups remain to be fulfilled. Indeed, these hopes can be
shattered by sporadic events of terrorist and communal attacks from time to time.

Despite these constraints many believe that there are ample scope for taking meaningful non-official initiatives to enhance further confidence-building in the region so that leaders cannot continue to shy away from regional engagements.

**Track-II Diplomacy**

As has been indicated earlier, a number of non-official initiatives have already been taken in South Asia. Yet, the fear of aggression, domination or embarrassment haunt most leaders of South Asia. The SAARC, therefore, remains in moribund status and South Asian leaders most often shy away from each other. In order to create a better ground for mutual co-operation among the mainstream leaders, the Track II diplomacy (i.e., the non-official engagements) can prove to be quite fruitful. This optimism is borne out by the stark reality of slow down of the official engagements for co-operation. The reasons for this slow down are many:

1. hard and fast rules followed by SAARC secretariat;
2. bureaucratic hassles and paper works at the secretariat which is run by national bureaucrats drawn from different member states;
3. lot of unnecessary formalities;
4. the requirement of consensus decision-making even for small thing which could be solved bilaterally;
5. lack of political will and mutual trust among the official leaders;
6. the leaders and officials involved can hardly visualise the potential benefits of regional co-operation;

7. near war situation prevailing in some border areas often accentuated by accusation of terrorist infiltration;

8. deep rooted scepticism arising out of ideological schism between religious and secular nationalism; internal problems of ethnic conflicts, lawlessness and poverty; and

9. lack of a collective new vision for rejuvenated South Asia even in the face of overwhelming pressure of globalisation.

Given this limitation of official approach of co-operation, the citizens of South Asia cannot be oblivious of the lost of opportunities of South Asian co-operation for their own prosperity and well being. Indeed, they are well aware of the imperative for a closer co-operation between the nations of South Asia. The need to build a South Asian identity based on their common values rooted in the historical, cultural, social, ethnic and civilisational traditions can hardly be overemphasised. Historically, South Asians were closer to each other in their way of life, philosophy, ethics, literature, music, dance, paintings, architecture than to other regional countries. But the legacy of confrontation has overtaken these positive commonalities. It is, therefore, time to reinvest the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizens' activism leading to a better environment of confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia for better co-operation.
Citizens' Actions

Regional co-operation should be organised around non-governmental organisations in their respective civil societies. This is, of course, happening to some extent. SAARC too has been instrumental in bringing NGOs together and letting people talk to each other, and share ideas and information. They are indeed drawing inspiration from each other and learning many lessons from best practices in individual countries. For example, the success of micro-credit initiatives for poverty reduction in Bangladesh has been widely shared by other non-governmental actors of South Asia. These non-statist co-operation can be further accelerated by activities like:

- more pro-active interaction between chambers (ala SAARC chambers of commerce and industries) for furthering co-operation in trade and investment;
- organising many more citizens' press conferences, deliberations in public force, seminars and workshops of academics and researchers highlighting the benefits of mutual co-operation and activation of Track-I co-operation;
- encouraging exchanges through videoconferences using internet facilities for strengthening the trust-building initiatives which are already in operation;
- media (particularly electronic) can play a crucial role in bringing the people of South Asia closer. This is, of course, happening, though mostly Indo-centric; and
- students and patients are flocking in thousands to Indian educational and medical institutions. This is, no doubt, bridging the cultural gap. At the same time it is also creating imbalance in the trade of service
sector. Greater number of joint venture initiatives in the service and educational sectors can be yet another option of people to people co-operation.

The civil society organisations have been working together in the form of bringing eminent citizens together in many commissions, policy advocacy initiatives, dialogues, peace initiatives etc. All these initiatives can be better co-ordinated if we could organise a South Asian network (or parliament) comprising of representatives selected by non-governmental organisations including think tanks. They may even work with tacit approval of their governments and promoted by SAARC. In other words, we need to create greater space for the citizens of South Asia so that they can come together to shape their future better. The nation states should come out of their restrictive shells and allow their citizens to intermix and intermingle for better understanding among themselves. This kind of opening up at the people to people level will create a moral pressure on the Track-I approach of co-operation so that it becomes more effective and committed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Track-II diplomacy for regional co-operation as indicated above can be concretised and accelerated if we take a number of policy initiatives as well as actions, both at the governmental and non-governmental levels. Some of these initiatives may include:

- More studies, research works in visualising the potential benefits of sub-regional/regional co-operation and proper dissemination of those findings (CPD, 2000).
Experimentation with co-operation at smaller sub-regional levels (e.g. Bangladesh-West Bengal, Bangladesh-Nepal-India).

India has to play a more accommodating role to build up confidence/trust among smaller neighbours. (e.g., let Nepal-Bangladesh road transit flourish; let there be better transit facility between Bangladesh and Nepal via India or West-Bengal and Tripura via Bangladesh).

In the face of speedy trade liberalisation, there is a need for monitoring of the policy changes (e.g., tariff, prices at the regional level for greater co-ordination and responding more effectively to the challenges of globalisation.

Let the smaller states benefit from the higher levels of development in the IT Sector in India (Rahman, 2000).

Learning from each other's success stories to respond to problem of acute poverty prevailing in the sub-region/region.

There should be greater exchanges of academics, poets, and cultural troupes among the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) countries in particular.

There should be easy access into each other's TV news and other programmes.

Facilitate greater contacts among citizens of South Asia by further improving road, rail and air travel facilities. It is, indeed, distressing to note that there is not even a single easy air connecting arrangement between major cities of South Asia. One has to go to Bangkok to reach Colombo from Dhaka. Similarly, Pakistanis need to go to Dubai to reach Kathmandu. All these practical hurdles diminish the potential for people to people contact in South Asia.
Despite all the bottlenecks South Asians should continue to work hard to come together. Together we will survive. Divided we will perish.

We know that during our childhood when we were alone we used to be afraid of ghosts. Indeed, this fear of ghosts was the fear of one's own weakness while one was lonely. Three-quarters of our fear relate to this fear of ghosts. This simply shows that we could not unite, we remained isolated from each other. The fear of poverty is likewise the fear of ghosts. We can cope with it provided we stand together.

— Rabindranath Tagore, On Cooperative (1918)
References


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