CHAPTER VI

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT THROUGH REGIONAL CO-OPERATION: THE EXPERIENCES OF SAARC

Various constituents of contemporary regional or sub-regional groupings share, among others, following critical concerns: i. A common threat perception i.e. common and similar (though not necessarily identical) threats either from internal or external sources, or both; and ii. Common foreign policy orientations regarding major issues related to the global balance of power and its regional manifestations, which provides congruence in their strategic perceptions. This implies not only to the developed world, but also to the developing countries. ASEAN and GCC are cases in point.

When South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) was launched in 1985, none of these critical concerns was shared by those members of the organisation who were expected to play the crucial role in its success. As a matter of fact, from the very onset of de-colonisation, South Asia has been beset with numerous interrelated domestic and inter-state conflicts. Parallel to these, there had been efforts in South Asia to reduce tension and even to find out an orderly structure of mutual relations with a view to releasing some of the resources and energy for the fulfilment of the tasks of socio-economic development. As suggested by the post-war experience of inter-state relations in South Asia, the region was left with two options:

i. to employ efforts with a view to resolving the issues of mutual discord and reaching a consensus on whence the threats come from and

how to face them before going for regional co-operation; or

ii. to initiate a process of regional co-operation amidst conflicts and mistrust in the hope that regional co-operation itself would serve as a catalyst for conflict management and resolution.

South Asia tried the first option for about four decades with no tangible results. More frustrating, another four decades could have been spent trying the first option without seeing the light in the tunnel. Such a situation tempted South Asian statesmen to try the second option the ultimate result of which was the creation of SAARC in 1985.

Being quite aware of the prevailing situation, South Asian leaders were highly cautious while setting the objectives of the organisation. The SAARC Charter signed by the Heads of States or Governments of the member countries at the First Summit of the organisation held in Dhaka during December 7-8, 1985 has stated that, "increased co-operation, contact and exchanges would contribute to the promotion of friendship and understanding" among the member states and promote the "welfare of the people of South Asia". Disputes and conflicts between member-states were kept out of the purview of SAARC, particularly at the insistence of India. New Delhi was concerned that discussions on such issues would isolate it as it was involved in numerous conflicts with almost all the neighbours. The Declaration on South Asian Regional Co-operation signed by the Foreign Ministers on August 2, 1985 specifically stipulates that "bilateral and contentious issue shall be excluded from the deliberations". The same was reiterated in the SAARC Charter.

The central objective of South Asian leaders was to initiate the process of regional co-operation amidst mistrust and conflicts in the hope that regional co-operation would generate a


119. See, ibid., p.59.
dynamism of its won in the process of which mutual confidence could be built, conflicts and disputes could be resolved or, at least, properly managed minimising their damaging impact. As discussed earlier, the founding fathers of ASEAN as well were motivated by the similar hopes while launching the Association amidst mistrusts and conflicts among its members.

The years since the emergence of SAARC have shown how swiftly politics in South Asia can oscillate between conflict and co-operation, between combativeness and constructive diplomacy. Despite enormous difficulties suffered by South Asian countries in their mutual relationship, SAARC made considerable efforts to move towards substantive areas of co-operation. The most remarkable achievement has been the Agreement on South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) signed by SAARC countries during the Seventh Summit of the organisation on 11 April 1993. The aim of SAPTA was to augment intra-SAARC trade. Accordingly, a list of 226 commodities for preferential tariff concessions, ranging from 10 to 100 percent, was approved by the Heads of State or Government of SAARC countries during the Eighth Summit held in New Delhi during May 2-4, 1995. With this final list of commodities, SAPTA came into operation on December 7, 1995. Meanwhile, SAARC has also decided to transform SAPTA into a SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 2005. Subsequently, in the Ninth Summit of SAARC held in Male during May 12-14 the decision was taken to accelerate the process and form the SAFTA by 2001. The ambition, however, proved to be highly unrealistic and certain to remain unfulfilled.

The concrete achievements of SAARC, in terms of fostering either regional co-operation or friendly relations among the member-states, were, however, not much significant. Gradually it became more and more evident that a regional politico-security environment full of suspicion and distrust, and a host of bilateral conflicts among the member-states are serving as a stumbling block in the way of moving towards substantive areas of co-operation within the framework of SAARC.


As discussed, the formation of SAARC was paradoxically followed by concerted efforts on the part of India to transform its natural pre-eminence into an imposed predominance that was reflected in the stationing of IPKF in Sri Lanka under a controversial treaty, its intervention in the Maldives to suppress an attempted coup, a virtual blockade imposed on Nepal as well as a non-reconciliatory approach towards the bilateral disputes with the neighbours. While the unbearable costs of this policy and a host of domestic constraints coupled with the changing context of regional and international politico-economic and strategic environment brought a change in Indian policy shifting its focus away from foreign adventure to domestic problems, its regional ambitions have not suffered any recognisable change. So are the security apprehensions of smaller SAARC countries. In the circumstances, neither India could device an appropriate method of making its pre-eminence in the region being recognised by its smaller neighbours without aggravating their security concerns; nor the smaller SAARC countries could decide on how to recognise India's natural pre-eminence in the region while guarding their independence from any possible Indian encroachment. Thus, the dilemma faced by the SAARC countries due to the persistence of big power-small power syndrome and consequential divergence in their security perceptions remains unresolved.

SAARC could bring very little, if at all, any change in the region with regard to the bilateral conflicts. Formally the position of SAARC and ASEAN were almost similar. Both the organisations refrained from considering bilateral and contentious issues. In practice, however, there was a qualitative difference. As Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, former Foreign Minister of Malaysia, recalls, while ASEAN officials repeatedly asserted to the public that political issues were never discussed, in reality ministers were able to wholly or partially settle many outstanding political issues among themselves.122 While, SAARC leaders as well made efforts to initiate behind-the-scene consultations and negotiations during the SAARC forums.

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with a view to resolving contentious issues, their success has not been remarkable. Understanding on only two issues were reached during the SAARC Summits. These are:

i. Understanding on a three-year accord over the sharing of Ganges water between Bangladesh and India reached during the First Summit in 1985; and

ii. The agreement between India and Pakistan reached during the Fourth SAARC Summit in 1988 to ease tension in their common borders along with an understanding to refrain from attacking each other's nuclear facilities.123

These have raised hopes that such gatherings might encourage meaningful dialogues on more crucial issues. Such hopes, however, remained far from being materialised. Meanwhile, the danger inherent in isolating the co-operative process from political issues has been painfully revealed when SAARC failed to hold its Fifth Summit in 1989 due to Indo-Sri Lankan dispute over the Tamil issue and the presence of IPKF in Sri Lanka. Again in 1999, SAARC summit has been postponed due to New Delhi's insistence. India was determined not to let Pakistan's military ruler General Pervaiz Musharraf gain regional and international legitimacy through participation in the SAARC summit. These are indicative of the danger that SAARC can be a victim of bilateral conflicts instead of making contribution to their resolution.

Despite the replacement of India's regional security posture of the 1980s by a considerably moderate one and its realisation of the consequences of protracted disputes with the neighbours, Indian ability to undertake any courageous initiative with a view to resolving the disputes with the neighbours was severely circumscribed. It was primarily due to a weak Congress government headed by Narasimha Rao that was vulnerable to domestic opposition and was morally blackmailed by the rising tide of Hindu nationalism.

However, the 1996 elections and consequential changes, seem to have put India on the threshold of a radical change in its policy towards the neighbours. The 1996 elections brought to power a coalition government headed by the United Front. Under the United Front government, India has undertaken an initiative with a view to resolving the country's some of the long-standing disputes with the neighbours, and thus, improving the overall political climate in the region. The new policy is associated with the name of I. K. Gujral who served the United Front government initially as Foreign Minister and finally as its Prime Minister. His long-standing image as a liberal gave the initiative remarkable credibility.

One of the crucial outcomes of the United Front government initiative aimed at improving relations with the neighbours has been the revitalisation of the bilateral mechanism for conflict management. The bilateral mechanism for conflict management between India on the one hand, and her smaller neighbours separately on the other, improved remarkably, though the bilateral mechanism for conflict management between India and Pakistan continued to remain stagnant or even worsen. Subsequent period witnessed intense negotiation between Bangladesh and India, India and Nepal as well as India and Sri Lanka.

In the regional "charm offensive"124 as launched by India, Bangladesh came to be at the top of the agenda. Soon after the 12 June Elections in Bangladesh, a leading English daily, The Indian Express, in an editorial expressed hopes that the governments in New Delhi and the new government in Bangladesh would be able to resolve the Farakka problem.125 In practice as well, following the change of Government in both the countries, the relations between Bangladesh and India, particularly with regard to bilateral disputes, began to move in a positive direction and that rather quickly. A series of high level visits have been exchanged between the two countries during which Indian side assured Bangladesh that, "Highest authority of India wants quickest resolution of bilateral problems with Bangladesh. Indian authority is aware of the problems faced by

125. See, Jana Kantha, June 16, 1996.
the people of Bangladesh owing to lesser flow of water from Farakka barrage.\textsuperscript{126} Indian Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral even expressed confidence over the signing of Indo-Bangladesh accord on the sharing of the Ganges water before the ensuing dry season.\textsuperscript{127}

Finally, the diplomatic initiative culminated in a summit meeting between Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Deve Gowda. During the summit meeting, the two leaders signed a Treaty on December 12, 1996 that envisages the sharing of Ganges water between the two countries for the next 30 years. Under the new agreement, Bangladesh will receive a 50 per cent share of the Ganges water when the water flow at Farakka is less than 70,000 cusecs. If the flow rises beyond that level, Bangladesh is guaranteed 35,000 cusecs; if it passes the 75,000-cusec mark, India is guaranteed 40,000 cusecs.\textsuperscript{128} Bangladesh-India Water Treaty is the outcome of a compromise on the part of both the sides. The treaty marked an end to the oldest and, by far, the thorniest dispute between Bangladesh and India. Whether the Treaty could repair the damage in bilateral relations would depend upon the ability of the parties to sustain the arrangement for long thirty years to come. This is, perhaps, the most challenging task facing the two countries in their bilateral relationship.

Another important milestone, in this regard, has been the Peace Accord on Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) signed on December 2, 1997 between the National Committee on CHT and the \textit{Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS)}.\textsuperscript{129} As discussed earlier, while a complex web of factors contributed to the emergence and sustenance of the insurgency in the CHT, clandestine involvement of India in the imbroglio significantly complicated its resolution. An understanding

\textsuperscript{126} The Bangladesh Observer, September 9, 1996.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., September 10, 1996.


reached between Dhaka and New Delhi in 1996 to co-operate with each other in dealing with cross-border insurgency paved the way for the signing of the Peace Accord.

The Peace Accord on CHT was designed to amend the CHT District Council Bills of 1989 with a view to accommodating some more demands of the tribal people. The Accord envisaged substantial administrative autonomy for the CHT to be administered by the three CHT District Councils and a Regional Council to be established where the tribal people will have a preponderance vis-à-vis the Bengali settlers in terms of power sharing. The extent of the autonomy, however, should remain within the broader framework of local government authorities as provided by the constitution of Bangladesh. In exchange, the Santi Bahini, the armed wing of the PCJSS, agreed to cease hostility, surrender arms, avail the opportunity of the general amnesty offered by the government and come to the national mainstream. The Peace Accord on CHT is in the process of implementation.

Under the United Front government, particularly since I. K. Gujral has taken office, India’s relations with its neighbours were moving towards a positive direction, though in case of Indo-Pakistan relations this trend has been less visible. More importantly, Indian policy towards its South Asian neighbours appeared to be on the threshold of a qualitative transformation. At the centre was conscious efforts on the part of the United Front government to replace ‘India Doctrine’ with what came to be known as ‘Gujral Doctrine’. The new doctrine envisages a friendly neighbourhood around India. Along with accommodation on and reconciliation of differences among South Asian countries, the doctrine also envisages that no South Asian country should allow its territory to be used for any activity that causes harm to the interests of the neighbouring countries.130

However, I. K. Gujral was ousted from power before the new Indian policy could take a concrete shape. More importantly, on March 19, 1998, a new coalition government headed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee took office. This has raised serious doubts about whether the policy propositions envisaged in the ‘Gujral

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Doctrine' would transform into a long-standing policy of India with regards to its neighbours or be lost into oblivion. For India, however, 'Gujral Doctrine' still remains a realistic policy option in dealing with the neighbours. It is particularly in view of the constraints and compulsions of India as discussed above. In the positive side, even after his electoral victory in 1999, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee did not make any indication that the BJP government could reconsider the 'Gujral Doctrine'. Even if the positive trends set by the 'Gujral Doctrine' sustain, the management and resolution of intra-group conflicts in SAARC would continue to remain a highly difficult undertaking.

Over the last couple of years, some of the conflicts between India and her smaller neighbours have been settled successfully. New Delhi's relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are moving towards a positive direction. On the other hand, Indo-Pakistan relations have witnessed another spiral of deterioration. The current spiral of deterioration in Indo-Pakistan relations began with the test of nuclear weapons by the two countries. India tested the nuclear weapons in Pokhran on 11th and 13th May 1998 and Pakistan followed the suit on the 28th and 30th of the same month in Chagai. Following the nuclear tests, India and Pakistan were being more and more entrenched into acrimonious relationship. All publicised efforts by the two countries aimed at finding out a \textit{modus vivendi} went in vein. In May 1999, Indian and Pakistani soldiers came to fight in the Kargil area in the Kashmir Valley that put the whole world on sharp alert because of the danger inherent in a war between two nuclear powers. While the crisis over Kargil has been defused, the relations between India and Pakistan remains highly volatile and conflict prone.\footnote{For details, see, A. K. M. Abdus Sabur, "Indo-Pakistan Security Relationship and the Kargil Crisis", \textit{BLISS Journal}, (Vol.20, No.3, July 1999).} As the settlement of disputes appear to be too farfetched, Pakistan and India need to live with each other through effective measures of conflict management. But this became a difficult challenge, particularly after the Kargil crisis.

The resolution of bilateral disputes among SAARC countries would require substantial compromise on the part of all the parties concerned, particularly India. This would be a
tremendously difficult task. As some reports suggest, Gujral was criticised at home for being too soft on Pakistan and he was also under pressure for not making compromise with other neighbours.\textsuperscript{132} As discussed, India's urge for playing a predominant role in the region is deep-rooted and a variety of powerful lobbies continue to advocate an assertive role for the country in the regional affairs. BJP itself is a proponent of this school of thought, though its ability to pursue an abrasive policy in relation to the neighbours is circumscribed by a host of factors of domestic and international nature as well as by possible opposition on the part of some of its crucial coalition partners.

The predicaments faced by other countries are as well difficult. In Pakistan, the ruling circles have depended too much on anti-Indian rhetorics to gain popular legitimacy, and thus, cultivated powerful anti-Indian lobbies. It would severely constrain its quest for a compromise solution to the disputes with India. In Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka as well, powerful lobbies exist that would resist even such compromises on bilateral disputes that could be justified in terms of long-standing national interests. In Bangladesh, for instance, soon after the initiative to resolve the country's long-standing disputes with India, including the sharing of Ganges water, was undertaken by the new Awami League government, these forces have begun a desperate agitation directed against the move. Following the signing of the Treaty on the sharing of Ganges water, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami denounced the Treaty as being against the country's interests.\textsuperscript{133}

In the circumstances, while ASEAN has made a decisive shift away from conflict to closer co-operation, SAARC countries still have a long way to travel to realise the wisdom of making compromise solutions to numerous bilateral disputes that would facilitate a departure from conflict to a course of co-operation.

Now the question is: can South Asian countries afford to be bogged down in conflicts giving SMRC and SAPTA a low-key

\textsuperscript{132} The Asiaweeek, (January 10, 1997), p.8.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
profile? The difficulties suffered by South Asia in the socio-economic fields and gigantic tasks ahead in these fields would continue to create tremendous pressure on the region for evolving an enlightened structure of mutual relationship based on shared interests and mutual consensus. Another important point, such a region cannot insulate itself from the on-going process of radical change in the international arena. In the changed matrix, economic dimension is gaining more and more prominence in international relations at the expense of its military dimension. The countries of the world - both developed and developing - are reorganising themselves into regional economic groupings. It is making difficult for any country - big or small, developed or underdeveloped - to make economic progress in isolation. The US anxiety following the decision to transform the EEC into a single market and its eagerness to develop NAFTA is a striking case in point.

Thus, any rational consideration given to the domestic and regional contexts of contemporary South Asia, the tasks of the regional countries in the field of socio-economic development and the environment in international arena that is to have vital importance for the fulfilment of these tasks would led us to the inescapable conclusion that the region can not afford a slow pace in furthering regional co-operation without severely jeopardising the prospects for progressive socio-economic and political development, and risking political upheavals with unpredictable consequences. Therefore, South Asia is destined to be subject to tremendous pressures, from within as well as outside the region, for embarking upon a path of meaningful co-operation for mutual benefit.

Such pressures themselves, however, would not resolve the region's problems. To make a qualitative departure from the past, serious and sincere efforts on the part of the regional countries are indispensable. As we have seen, conflicts and mistrust in South Asia are so stubborn that they are capable enough to resist pressures for regional co-operation. Therefore, in order to vitalise the process of co-operation within the framework of SAARC, it is necessary to concentrate the collective efforts of regional countries aimed at resolving the existing conflicts and disputes, improving bilateral relations as well as overall political climate in inter-state relations. In this regard, the most pressing task of the time is the elimination of
existing hot-beds of tension in the region and the prevention of
the emergence of new ones, and device ways and means in
order to resolve the regional conflicts. In cases where the
solution is out of reach, the countries of the region must learn
to live with the conflicts through effective measures of conflict
management. It is vital for the region, as conflicts in South Asia
can not be eliminated either easily or within a short span of
time.

To sum-up, the two most crucial tasks of contemporary
regional politics in South Asia, namely, i. vitalising the process
of regional co-operation for mutual benefits; and ii. evolving a
mechanism for the proper management and resolution of its
intra- and inter-state conflicts are inter-related and
interdependent. Neither of them can be fulfilled in isolation. Nor
any one of them can wait the other. The urgency of the time
dictates that both of them should go together. To make the
current strategy for making a departure from conflict to a
course of co-operation an effective one, it is necessary to
supplement the efforts aimed at vitalising the process of
regional co-operation with similar efforts aimed at managing
and resolving conflicts, and build mutual confidence in the
region. To this, the experiences of other more successful
regional groupings, ASEAN in particular, are of crucial
importance.