REGIONAL SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has made a gratifying progress since its founding in December 1985. The emergence of the SAARC has a great significance and is a milestone in the history of South Asia. As the sponsor of SAARC, Bangladesh has made a great contribution to the formation and progress of the organization.

I. Major Achievements of SAARC

1. Institutional Framework

In 1980, Bangladesh put forward a proposal for establishing an organization of regional cooperation in South Asia. This initiative was supported in principle by all other countries in the region, namely Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. However, considering the situation in the region which is characterized by complicated contradictions and conflicts, the institutionalization of SAARC had to be a slow, gradual process. The seven South Asian countries agreed through consultations to accomplish the framework step by step: first step was to hold meetings of Foreign Secretaries to do preparatory work for the second step—Foreign Ministerial meetings, the third step would be the Summit. The first meeting of seven Foreign Secretaries was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital on April 21-23, 1981. The meeting decided to establish a “Committee of Whole” comprising the senior officials of the seven countries with Sri Lanka as a Coordinator. It also set up 5 study groups of experts to explore the areas for cooperation.
Five meetings of Foreign Secretaries had been held in respective member countries from then to August 1, 1983 when the first Foreign Ministers meeting was held in New Delhi. The seven Foreign Ministers signed a declaration formally launching the South Asian Regional Cooperation. It stressed the need for the creation of the organization. The meeting also decided to set up a “Standing Committee” comprising the Foreign Secretaries of seven countries.

The first summit of SAARC was held at Dhaka on December 7-8, 1985. The meeting formally announced the setting up of the organization and adopted its Charter. It took about 5 years to complete the institutionalization. In January 1987, the SAARC secretariat was set up in Kathmandu, with Mr. Abul Ahsan of Bangladesh as its first Secretary General.

2. Objectives and Principles

According to the Charter of SAARC the major objectives are focused on the promotion of the socio-economic welfare and cultural development of the South Asian region, on the achievement of the goal of collective self-reliance through active collaboration in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields. The SAARC members are also determined to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries and other regional or international organizations in various fields with similar aims.

From the very beginning the SAARC has observed the following principles:

Cooperation within the framework of SAARC “shall be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and mutual benefit”.

The regional cooperation shall not be “a substitute for bilateral and multilateral cooperation but would complement them”.

Decisions of all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity; Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations.

These principles have paved the way for the smooth development of the SAARC.

3. Areas of Cooperation

Despite many differences and disputes, South Asian countries have common ground for regional cooperation; They are all
developing countries confronted with similar problems such as poverty and backwardness. They have common objectives for developing their national economy and improving the living standard of their people.

The areas of cooperation have been gradually increased. When the first meeting of Foreign Secretaries was held in 1981, they started with following 5 areas: agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, health and population activity. Three additional areas of cooperation were finalized at the second meeting of Foreign Secretaries. They are transport, postal services, and scientific and technical cooperation. The third meeting identified another area: sports, arts and culture.

The first Foreign Ministerial meeting in August 1983 announced an “Integrated Programme of Action” (IPA) in above mentioned nine areas of cooperation.

In recent years the seven members have agreed on the setting up of the South Asian Food Security Reserve and a SAARC convention on suppression of terrorism.

At the fourth Summit held in December 1988 the seven leaders adopted the Pakistani proposal entitled “SAARC 2000—A Basic Needs Perspective”, aiming at the development of the vast human resources of the region. This programme reflected the desire of SAARC members to put their cooperation on long-term basis. The summit also decided to declare the year 1989 as the “SAARC Year Combating Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking”, and to make concerted efforts to fight this menace.

4. Peace and Security in the Region

The regular SAARC meetings of leaders, Foreign Ministers and other high ranking officials have provided good opportunities to them to hold informal discussions about regional and bilateral issues. For example, at the Fourth SAARC summit, Pakistan’s newly elected Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had meetings with her Indian counterpart, Rajiv Gandhi, and they reached three agreements on the prohibition of attacks on each other’s nuclear installations, on cultural cooperation and on the avoidance of double taxation in civil aviation.

At previous summits informal talks and friendly consultations between Bangladesh and Indian leaders, between Sri Lankan and
Indian leaders, between Indian and Nepalese leaders, were also held. These bilateral talks have contributed to mutual understanding and mutual trust, improving bilateral relations and leading to peace and stability in the region.

II. Security Problem in South Asia and Its Impact on SAARC

Since the beginning of 1980s, the developments of the regional situation in South Asia and its contiguous areas have added a great deal of complicated factors to the issue of peace and security in the region. The peace and security in South Asia have an important influence on the regional cooperation.

1. The rivalry between the two superpowers poses a major threat to the peace and security in South Asia. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan at the end of 1979 made the area a "hot spot". The war in Afghanistan has not only caused the Afghan people grave sufferings, but also constituted an immediate threat to peace and stability of the region. Of all its neighbours, Pakistan was the first to be affected by the situation. Its security environment has worsened. More than 3 million Afghan refugees have gone into exile in Pakistan. In order to safeguard her own security and the peace in the region, Pakistan has supported the Afghan people in their just struggle against the Soviet invaders, and made unremitting efforts to achieve a political settlement of the Afghan issue. Pressed by the international and internal difficulties, Mikhail Gorbachev made a decision to extricate Soviet Union from that predicament. On February 15, 1989 the Soviet Union completed its troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, on schedule as set out by the Geneva Accords of April 14, 1988. However, the war has not come to an end. The Soviet Union continued to support the unpopular Najibullah regime to consolidate the rule of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Mujahidin resistance forces persist in their final objective of overthrowing the PDPA regime and establishing an Islamic government in Afghanistan. Despite the unremitting efforts made by United Nations to promote the creation of a broadly based government in Afghanistan, little progress has been made in this regard.

It can not be denied that the South Asian countries have divergent views on the environment for the regional security. They have no common perceptions on where the threat to their security comes
from. The Afghan question is the case in point. Most of the South Asian countries regarded the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a serious threat to peace and security of the region and condemned such an act of aggression. But a certain country has never openly condemned the Soviet Union, and it described the Soviet action as a response to the US military presence in the Indian Ocean and Gulf area. Different views among the South Asian countries also find full expression in their attitudes towards the Kabul regime. India recognized the PDPA government in Kabul and wanted to bring Afghanistan into SAARC. The request was rejected by most member states of the organization.

2. South Asia is a troubled area where complicated contradictions and conflicts have existed among the countries of the region ever since their independence, owing to historical reasons and the evil consequences of the western colonialist policy. For example, the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the problem in sharing the water resources of the Ganges River between India and Bangladesh, and the Tamil ethnic crisis between India and Sri Lanka, are important factors affecting the peace and security in the region. In recent years there have been some problems in the inter-state relations among South Asian countries, and most of them occurred between India and its neighbours. These problems have an adverse impact on the progress of the SAARC.

India and Pakistan have been at war with each other three times since their independence. It is not easy to clear up their long-standing antagonism and suspicion for each other. Although the bilateral relations of the two countries have improved to some extent in recent years, these relations remain unstable and changeable. Sometimes they got relaxed but the detente does not last; and sometimes they got strained but the tension has not led to a war. Since the beginning of 1980s the process of normalization of Indo-Pakistan relations has made some progress, a commission at the ministerial level was established and held its first meeting on June 1, 1983. They discussed means and measures to improve the bilateral relations in the fields of trade, cultural exchanges, tourism and consular affairs. However, the Indo-Pakistan relations became tense again in early 1984. Armed conflicts broke out time and again along the ceasefire-line in Kashmir. Both sides lashed out at the other for interference in internal affairs. On October 30 Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Rajiv Gandhi succeeded his mother as
Indian Prime Minister. Pakistan took the initiative to improve its relations with India. India also made its due responses. A turn for the better appeared in Indo-Pakistan relations. Through the year of 1985, there were six meetings between Pakistan President and Indian Prime Minister. Especially in the summit on December 17, 1985 in New Delhi, the two leaders reached an agreement that both sides would not attack each other’s nuclear installations and would take concrete measures to promote the normalization of their bilateral relations. The development of the situation was not as smooth as people had expected. The agreements reached by the leaders of the two countries were not completely put into effect. The negotiations about Pakistan’s proposal for a No-War Pact and India’s proposal for a treaty of peace and friendship did not yield any substantive results. From the end of 1986 to the beginning of 1987, a new tension arose again in Indo-Pak relations due to the winter military exercises simultaneously carried out by both sides along the borders in which hundreds of thousands of troops of both countries confronted each other at a short distance. In order to avoid further deterioration of the situation Pakistan proposed to hold “emergency consultations” with India. Then the talks between the Foreign Secretaries of the two countries were started on January 31, 1987 and an agreement to relax the tension along the border was finally reached.

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and India worsened in the first half of 1988. They accused each other of interference in the Sikh crisis in India’s Punjab, and the turmoil in Pakistan’s Sind province.

The Indo-Pak relations have improved since Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister of Pakistan in December 1988. The Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi held bilateral talks with Benazir Bhutto during the Fourth SAARC summit in Islamabad, and signed three agreements as mentioned in the first part of the paper. There have been several meetings between the two countries at various levels to discuss the boundary question. Both sides agreed “to work towards a comprehensive settlement”, and to avoid the use of force “to ensure durable peace in the Siachen Area”. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to Pakistan in July 1989 accelerated the normalization of Indo-Pak relations. This was the first visit by an Indian Premier to Pakistan in 30 years. The two leaders expressed earnest
desire to find out ways and means for promoting friendship and cooperation between the two countries.

3. Most countries in South Asia are obsessed by various domestic problems. Internal contradictions such as ethnic conflicts and communal disturbances often break into riots. This situation has been deteriorating in recent years. Moreover, some of the ethnic groups and communities exist across the borders between different countries. For example, there are Punjabs in both India and Pakistan, Tamils in both India and Sri Lanka, and Pathans in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, their ethnic conflicts not only affect domestic political stability and economic developments, but also have an influence on the relations between neighbouring countries as well as the stability of the whole region.

The most destabilizing factor for Sri Lanka is the ethnic conflicts involving the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil communities. Since 1970s, some of the Tamil radicals have advocated for the establishment of an independent state by name of “Tamil Eelam”. In July 1983, a massive ethnic riot broke out in the island country. From then on, the ethnic conflicts became increasingly fierce and got out of control, and finally escalated to armed confrontations between Tamil armed groups and government troops. The strongest Tamil armed organization was called the “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” (LTTE). One of the important reasons for the deterioration of the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka was that the Tamil armed groups were supported by the Tamils in India. This led to tensions between Sri Lanka and India. The government and public opinion in Sri Lanka sharply criticized India for interfering in her internal affairs. The situation changed dramatically in July 1987, when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Sri Lanka and signed a “Peace agreement” with President Jayewardene, on ending the ethnic conflicts. Immediately after that, a 6,000 man Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) entered Sri Lanka. The number of IPKF was gradually increased to about 50,000. The majority Sinhalese in Sri Lanka are strongly opposed to the India-Lanka agreement. Demonstrations and riots have taken place in capital Colombo and other cities in southern part of the country.

The Indo-Sri Lanka agreement was intended to bring peace to the island by settling the ethnic conflicts and disarming the Tamil Tigers. Unfortunately the original objective has not been realized. On June 1, 1989 Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa
demanded that India should withdraw its troops from the island by
July 29, 1989 (the second anniversary of the signing of the agree­
ment). But the Indian government refused to do so and argued
that the Indian troops can not be withdrawn till the terms of the
Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement are fulfilled. The tensions between India
and Sri Lanka had an adverse impact on the regional cooperation.
The SAARC Foreign Ministers meeting was scheduled to be held in
Islamabad on July 1, 1989, but had to be postponed indefinitely
because the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka conveyed his Pakistani
counterpart that he would not attend the meeting as long as the
Indian government insisted on maintaining the IPKF in Sri Lanka.
India alleged that Sri Lanka should not bring “bilateral issues” into
SAARC. But as an Indian political analyst pointed out that it
would be too much to expect any country to put aside its sovereignty
just for the sake of consensus.

After tough negotiations Sri Lanka has reached an agreement
with India on the withdrawal of its troops from the island by the
end of this year. The fifth summit of the SAARC was scheduled
to be held in Colombo in December. But the recently held Foreign
Ministers meeting failed to finalize the date of the summit. It
seems that success of the next summit depends on the development
of the Indo-Sri Lanka relations and the fulfilment of the withdrawal
of Indian troops from Sri Lanka.

The disputes on trade and transit between India and Nepal also
have negative effects on the progress of the SAARC.

To sum up, the regional cooperation and the peace and security
in South Asia are closely related. The future of SAARC depends
on building mutual trust and confidence amongst its members. It
should be noticed that although the regional cooperation in South
Asia is still in its initial stage and there are many difficulties and
obstacles on its way ahead, as long as all the countries in the region
continue to make joint efforts, the SAARC will certainly make
greater progress in the future.