PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF SARC AS AN ORGANISATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

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INTRODUCTION

Increasing cooperation among nations has been one of the most significant features of international relations in the later half of the twentieth century. The idea of regional cooperation, though not new, gained new momentum during this period, in order to meet various political and economic challenges faced by countries in a particular geographical area. The rapid emergence of regional organisations in different parts of the world amply manifest that they provide an effective approach for the solution of common problems and the promotion of common interest of the region. The gains from regional cooperation, as has been shown empirically in a number of studies, are enormous. But the hurdles are equally formidable. It is not only the economic and political objectives, but also a host of perceptual and emotive factors that have to be taken into consideration to make the regional arrangement functional and consolidated. Thus some regional cooperation groupings have made impressive progress, some are still bogged down in initial stages while others remain non-starters. Regional cooperation in South Asia was a case in point of the last category until recently.
The South Asian region has 20 per cent of the world population and 25 per cent population of the developing world. It has 3.31 per cent of the land area of the world. The region as a whole is relatively poor in natural resources. The man-land ratio in the region is much less favourable than in other parts of the world. The meagre natural resources other than the land are also unevenly distributed within the region for the bulk of them are concentrated in one country, India which in size, both in terms of population as well as in gross domestic product is approximately three times as large as any of the rest of the countries of the region which are included in the South Asian Regional cooperation. Besides, the structure of production and the technological base in India span almost the entire range of modern industry whereas most of the other countries in the region are relatively less advanced in industrialization. Within this uneven resource situation, the population growth rate in the region is higher than the developing Asia. Economically, South Asia is one of the poorest belts in the world. Almost the entire range of developing dilemmas of the Third World may be said to be present in South Asia. Each South Asian country is beset with socio-economic and political tensions which the social scientists prefer to call a phenomenon of transition to modernity.

Under the circumstances and after a searching appraisal of the realities, Bangladesh took the initiative for regional cooperation in South Asia, aimed at promoting the welfare of its people, improving their quality of life and in turn strengthening their collective self-reliance. Since 2 May 1980 when the move for SARC was set afoot by late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh, SARC has moved from the stage of technical studies and identification of areas of cooperation to an active phase of implementation of joint programmes in a number of specific areas as incorporated in the Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation agreed upon in the first meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Region held in New Delhi on 1-2 August 1983. Currently, the SARC is poised for a summit meeting likely to be held sometime in the later part of 1985 in Dhaka. It is time that the members of
the SARC review its progress and study its prospects and impediments as an organization for regional cooperation designed to contribute towards solving their basic problems through mutual cooperation, trust and understanding in the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust, fears and grievances.

Against this backdrop, it is attempted here to assess the problems and prospects of this emerging organization. While dwelling on the aims and objectives of the SARC, its institutional evolution and achievements made so far the focus would be on the study of the potentials of South Asian Regional cooperation and the possible impediments that might stand in the way of turning the dream into a reality.

1. RATIONALE AND EVOLUTION OF SARC

The underlying motive of SARC was the premise that cooperation among nations in the spirit of equality and partnership would bring mutual benefits and stimulate solidarity through multilateral cooperation. In view of the global economic situation the interactions within the developing countries have greatly increased indicating the need for closer cooperation and coordination to safeguard and uphold the interests of the Third World countries. Furthermore, it is believed that through regional cooperation directed to expanded intra-regional trade and development in industry and agriculture as the key areas, collective self-reliance would be encouraged. In a process of regional cooperation South Asia can be expected to make its voice effectively heard in the international community commensurate with its intrinsic regional merit. While Bangladesh proposal did not suggest any model for South Asian Cooperation, it was hoped that once the sapling started growing necessary institutional arrangement to support and sustain this growth process will gradually evolve. The Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation signed on 2 August 1983 in New Delhi by the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka marked the completion of the preparatory phase and the beginning
of a new phase of active implementation of joint programmes in a number of specific areas. "With the creation of SARC South Asia emerged as a regional entity for the first time in international political system," ¹

A careful study of the objectives and principles reveals that SARC was envisaged as being complementary to and not a substitute for, bilateral and multilateral cooperation. And the basis of this cooperation is to be guided by the accepted international principles of inter-state relations, namely the sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, noninterference in the internal affairs of other states and mutual benefit. The primary emphasis was on the welfare of its people to improve the quality of life, through acceleration of economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region, providing all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and promoting collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia. The objectives also were defined to go beyond the socio-economic development and encompassed the area of mutual trust, understanding of each other’s problems and cooperation in international forums on matters of common interest.

The Foreign Ministers Conference held in New Delhi (1-2 August 1983) decided to launch the Integrated Programme of Action for South Asian Regional Cooperation. With the signing of the Delhi Declaration, the signatories agreed to establish (a) Technical Committee, (b) Action Committee and (c) the Standing Committee to give the infra-structure shape to the institutional arrangements. In sum, the declaration incorporated not only the major rationale for South Asian regional cooperation but also endorsed setting up of some organisational structure for the cooperation.

Besides, the rule of unanimity has been accepted by the member countries at all levels of decision making and the ‘bilateral’ and ‘contentious issues’ have been excluded in the deliberations of SARC. This is to help avoid conflict-situation and controversy besides the consensus of opinion for the regional cooperation to function smoothly. The most important aspect of the ground-
work was to provide for financing arrangements to meet the cost of the short-term and long-term activities under the Integrated Programme of Action. While under section III of the Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation participation of each country in financial costs of the programmes of cooperation has been kept voluntary, for long term projects provision has been made to explore external assistance from appropriate sources. This reflect the multidimensional aspects of its finance resources for cooperation and assistance from within and without.

Though it is too early to evaluate the achievements of the newly-born South Asian Regional Cooperation one of its important success was the prompt endorsement of SARC proposal by all the seven member countries of South Asia notwithstanding the initial reservation on the part of some. Another major achievement of SARC, is the considerable work done at the technical level to identify possible areas of cooperation and prepare specific programmes in agreed areas. In pursuance of the declaration on South Asian Regional cooperation signed by the Foreign Ministers of South Asian countries in New Delhi, India in August, 1983, the Technical Committees consisting of the expert representatives from the member states met in different capitals from October 1983 to January 1984 and after due deliberations prepared reports on the following subjects in the places and dates mentioned against their names.

The Reports of the Technical Committees are as under

Never in the history of the South Asian countries, such a wide spectrum of areas has been explored and the recommendations been made by experts with consensus of opinion for short-term and long-term activities between the countries of the region. A careful scrutiny of the reports manifests that the member countries will immensely be benefitted if the interaction takes place in the demarcated area of operation. Besides, the number of seminars and symposiums being held on mutually agreed subjects of cooperation in the already identified areas of cooperation and exchange of delegates between the members states, the first ever South Asian Federation games and athletics competition held in Kathmandu (17-23 September, 1984) and the formation of South Asia Council for Cooperation for Trade Link have added new momentum to the whole process.

2. PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

In view of the much awaited summit meeting likely to be held in Dhaka, it is pertinent that an appraisal is made of the inherent problems and the prospects SARC entails in its march ahead. Looking from historical perspective the problems towards regional cooperation in South Asia have been formidable. Precisely speaking the diverse conditions of the countries of South Asia and the wide varieties of factors in the context of global challenges have resulted in the “commonalities” and the “incompatibilities” no less contributing towards aggravation of tension and conflict among the concerned countries of the region and therein lies the potentialities and the impediments.

a. Problems

The problems of regional cooperation in South Asia are of diverse origin and character which would be discussed here.

1. To start with the first category of factors which have been obstructing the efforts of genuine regional cooperation of the region is the colonial legacies that accompanied even after the independence of the South Asian countries. Many institutional
and communication linkages of economies under changed arrange-
ments with United Kingdom and United States have been con-
tinuing in case of Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. And
in many cases the developed countries would not let them to be
severed or weakened without resistance. This is manifest in
trade, technology transfers, financial investment and operations
of multinational corporations in the concerned countries. Besides
the overall hegemony of the North in the global economy particu-
larly in the fields of currency, banking, communication, informa-
tion control, technological superiority, managerial skill and effi-
ciency came formidable in the way of forging and promoting mutu-
ally beneficial South-South cooperation. The “Group of 77”
and the non-aligned movement though are confronting these,
the progress is not very encouraging. As a consequence South
Asia cannot escape from the overall impact and constraints of
global economy and political dynamics.

2. Another important impediment is information gap, or
inadequate knowledge in one country of the resource potentials
and capabilities of cooperation of the other countries at the regio-
nal level. This was taken into consideration during the fourth
meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of South Asian countries held
in Dhaka during 28-30 March 1983 while recommending adoption
of Integrated Programme of Action in SARC. The short-term
programme of exchange of data, exchange of expert service, trai-
nning and research etc. when picks up momentum, the infra-
structural obstacles may be removed to a considerable degree.
Further, when the joint venture projects of regional cooperation
will be expanded, the availability of the financial resources will
assume an indispensable and significant aspect, for the fact that
the presently envisaged arrangements for mobilization of regional
resources on voluntary basis and allowing restricted extra-regional
financial support sources may not be adequate for the purpose.
With the need of greater external helps for financing the programme,
the financing agencies’ demand for some role in the decision making
cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, the role of extra-regional
financiers may not prove to be compatible with the autonomy, capabilities, and development priorities of the region.

3. The other problems emanate from the politico-strategic and politico-economic context of the region.

a. Politico-Strategic

1. The first important feature of this region is its geography having deep impact upon the concerned countries of South Asia and its relationship with the rest of Asia, physically and psychologically. The region is peripheral to the main Asian land mass and the principal land channel of communication connecting West Asia and Europe with East Asia. The result is that South Asia is part of but distinct from the rest of Asia, a dichotomy that is of considerable importance. Inherently the region is Indo-centric in nature meaning thereby that India is central to the whole region. Because of this special characteristic of the region, no regional scheme of cooperation and collaboration can be taken in which India does not become central. And this creates problems and natural impediments for equality of participation. The five principles of interstate relations as endorsed in the declaration of SARC in Delhi possibly aims at removing the apprehension of such possibilities.

2. Besides, the power disparity between India and her other neighbours is another important problem for regional cooperation. In size, demography, military and in economics, India, stands as a giant. Of South Asia's almost 2 million square miles of territory, India alone occupies 1.2 million square miles. Demographically India is the most populous country of the world next to China. In India live 1/6 of the world's total population.

3. In addition, despite the considerable cultural affinity, common historical experience and as a distinct economic entity sharing commitments for fighting poverty and underdevelopment, the political climate in the region does not appear very encouraging for economic integration. For example, India and Pakistan behave as political antagonists; they have fought three wars since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the latest being in 1971
during the War of Independence of Bangladesh. “Throughout the years of their independence the main security concern of India and Pakistan has been defence against each other. Even though the situation has started to become favourable since the signing of the Simla Agreement of July 1972 and by 1975 with the restoration of communication and trade link between India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, one may be inclined to say that South Asia has yet to reach a degree of political cohesion and understanding needed for economic integration.

The sheer territorial size of India, her resource endowment and the level of her industrial and overall economic development engender fears among its smaller neighbours. As feeling of insecurity pervades the smaller countries of South Asia because of India’s overwhelming politico-economic power, such a feeling of insecurity and causes of conflicts like demarcation of borders, sharing of water flows from international rivers and so on get manifest in the differences in the orientation of foreign policies of different countries.

Unless the divergent foreign policy orientations of these countries are harmonized and a sense of security is generated in smaller nations of the region, it may not be very realistic to expect the desired degree of interdependence which may be necessary in an economic grouping in the region. True, the political understanding among the major countries of the region, at the present moment, is quite low and may not appear to be encouraging to the formation of an economic union in the region. It is possible that the desire to solve the overriding economic problems may create requisite political understanding for a scheme for closer economic cooperation.

4. Besides, tremendous diversity in national value systems, whether “traditional” or ‘modern’ may cause a major obstruction to regional cooperation and coordination. However, given the political will among the ruling elites of the countries of South Asia it may prove possible for them to interact and cooperate for common economic, political, cultural goals which would eventually lead to mutual confidence building.
5. Furthermore, security concerns have often given rise to contradictions specially in the context of inequalities in the size and capabilities between India and other states. The feelings of insecurity in the region derive mainly from this latent mutual distrust based on perceptions of behavioural patterns and basic attitudes. These have obstructed cooperation between the concerned countries and forced them into a situation where the South Asian countries have looked outside for support and assistance particularly from the great powers for counter-balancing intra-regional pressures and adversaries. The divergence in security concerns has been well exploited by the external powers in furtherance of their global strategic interests. However, despite differences in foreign policy postures the countries of South Asia no longer appear as divisive as in the past. Their position on global economic and geo-strategic questions being now less divergent it is only rarely that they find themselves on opposite sides in international forums on such matters as non-alignment vs alignment, East-West relations or North-South and South South issues. The countries of the region may thus look inward and work for the healthy growth of regional cooperation in South Asia.

b. Politico-economic

1. The South Asian region is a typical resource poor, less developed area with a per capita GDP of $150 where the primary sector dominates the economies and is contributing between one-third and three-fifth of GDP in the countries of the region and the contribution of manufacture and mining sectors to GDP ranges from only about 11 to 24 per cent. Agriculture remains as yet extremely backward with consequent chronic food shortage, with rapid decline in land-man ratio, and growing un and under employment. Industrial growth in the region has been slow and, because of the strategy of import substitution, often distorted and inefficient, most industrial units are suboptimal, capital and import intensive and suffer from chronic excess capacities. About 60 per cent of the export of the region consists of primary products which suffers from sagging demand and declining prices. In view
of the heavy dependence of the region on the imports of capital goods, industrial and agricultural inputs, as well as essential consumer goods including food, the net barter terms of trade of the region deteriorates, its import capacity dwindles, and the balance of payments deficit goes on increasing. These trends appear to perpetuate the region’s dependence on external aid and continue to retard the pace of structural change along desirable lines and economic growth.

2. Added to this, economically with the big size of its economy and diversified industrial base and progress toward self-reliance India is much stronger than all her neighbours. However, though India has emerged as a strong regional power, because of her considerable limitations and weakness, she is not sufficiently powerful to act as an autonomous decision making centre at her own in the regional affairs. This duality of her position has led to mutually incompatible threat perceptions and apprehension. India’s insistence on the rule of unanimity for decision making was dictated more with the apprehension of the possible “ganging up” of the neighbours against India in the framework of regional cooperation. Besides, this was reflected in India’s initial behaviour and hesitation towards the regional cooperation and in framing the ‘ground-rules’ for SARC to exclude the bilateral and the contentious issues as reflected in colombo Jt. communique of April 1981.

b. Prospects

It is only in 1980s that for the first time South Asia as a region has attempted to form a regional cooperation forum and Bangladesh initiative undoubtedly imparted awareness and conscious realization of the potentialities of cooperation. Despite the impediments which are powerful, the recent process of institutionalisation, slow though, makes it manifest that SARC has come to stay.

1. One of the most important sources of potential success of South Asian Regional Cooperation is the commonality of its member countries in geography, history, economy and culture. “South Asia is a contiguous landmass without any natural frontiers except the narrow water corridors between India on the one
hand and Sri Lanka and Maldives on the other.” & Most of these countries have experienced if not identical but similar historical experience. Colonialism gripped India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, though it did not formally annex Nepal and Bhutan, these Himalayan Kingdoms could not escape the undesirable influence and implication of the colonial rule. The Region has a rich mosaic of religions and languages which often cross national boundaries and events in one country have significant bearing on developments in neighbouring countries of the region. For centuries they have together preserved and propagated akin philosophical traditions, cultural values and norms of life. These had promoted interaction between the peoples of South Asia on a massive scale which helped to remove misunderstandings between nations and modified the negative perceptions of each other. Moreover, the distribution of major Linguistic groups across national boundaries has a substantial impact on communication which could serve more constructive purposes on a transnational basis.

2. In addition to the already identified areas, there are other important sectors in which vast potentialities exist for regional cooperation. Trade is one of them. In the field of trade the concerned countries of the region have common problems in respect of exports, imports and terms of trade. There is no doubt that improved trade relation in the region will be advantageous to every country which will cut on transport cost and time, retain benefits within the region that are now being appropriated by third country trading sources. All the South Asian Countries suffer from an adverse trade balance with India with only exception of Pakistan. In South Asian region India has reached a higher stage of economic development than other countries of the SARC. India owns most of the total resources of the region in respect of uranium, iron ore, bauxite, copper, gold, lead, manganese, silver, tungsten, zinc, asbestos and diamonds. It has most of the resources of coal, crude petroleum, chromium, and salt. Under the operation of normal economic forces, cooperation between India and other countries cannot be on an equal footing and it may be
argued that India is likely to benefit more from intra-regional cooperation than other countries of the region. India and Bangladesh have common problems in the export of jute and jute goods which are exposed to competition from substitutes. While they compete in world markets, they can also cooperate with each other in market research to expand the market, in the arrangements for stabilization of prices and in technical research for reducing production costs, for facing competition from substitutes and for discovering new uses for jute and jute goods. India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are all interested in the export of tea and shrimps. They can cooperate in international arrangements for the stabilization of prices and the maintenance of minimum prices which are compatible with the cost of production. All the countries of South Asia have common problems in the exports of their manufactures to the markets in western countries where these exports are subject to tariff and non-tariff barriers. Besides, they have common problems in respect of some of their imports such as machinery, equipment and oil and on factors which determine the terms of their trade. A solution of these problems requires negotiations with the developed countries and the oil exporting countries. South Asian countries can negotiate from a better position if they act together rather than individually.

The position is similar with regard to the transfer of technology, dealing with multinational corporations and the shipping lines. This is also true of all matters within the framework of the North-South dialogue. The South Asian countries have abundant prospects of gaining from acting together and in cooperation with developing countries in the rest of the world. All these areas of common interest need to be identified and to be studied in depth from the angle of each country’s interest for chalking out a common line of action to best safeguard the interests of the concerned countries singly and collectively.

3. The economies of the countries of the region can be made complementary for balanced inter-dependence through production planning. The prospect of cooperation will be greatly increased,
if for example India sacrifices its policy of autarky in respect of manufactured consumer goods and jointly plans with other countries for interdependence of the countries of the region for the supply of such consumer goods. In other words, if it decides to vacate certain industries over a period of time for other countries of the region and to move to higher stages of processing using more sophisticated technologies of which it is capable, these other countries on their part may obtain some of their requirements by imports from India for which India may have the necessary capacity or may be able to establish such capacity. As other countries get industrialised their imports of manufactured goods, instead of decreasing would increase and they would thus become goods markets for the products of the Indian industry. So it may be to the common advantage of all to promote dependence on one another rather than self-sufficiency for each. The role of India is crucial in the approach to cooperation on the lines as mentioned.

4. Among many other important areas for cooperation which need to be explored are communication and travel within the region which may be gainfully reviewed for facilitating intra-regional communication and travel. The countries of SARC may also examine the possibilities of establishing common shipping and insurance services. Since the region is richly endowed with manpower resources and high rate of population growth (2.2% against 1.7% of the world as a whole) neutralizing a substantial part of the increase in the gross national product, the members of SARC may study the scope for coordination of existing manpower utilisation including export to Middle Eastern countries and for the investment of surplus financial resources of the Middle Eastern countries in regional projects.

5. The South Asian countries can profitably cooperate in developing and harnessing natural resources. The limited natural resources which are relatively very small compared with the rest of the world are also very unevenly distributed within the region. But the region has abundant hydro-power and irrigation potential from its water resources. The enormous water resources of the Himalayas, a large part of which remain unutilized, offers a
great potential for development. As the bulk of the water resources are derived from common rivers which flow through more than one country, these resources can best be utilized on the basis of joint development of the river basin by the riparian countries. Though the estimates vary, the hydro-power potential of Nepal rivers alone is considered to be at the tune of 83,000 mw which is approximately equal to the combined installed capacity of Canada, the US and Mexico. No less significant is the hydro-power potential of Bhutan where work is going on Chukkha Hydel plant with India’s assistance of US $ 10 m. The Himalayas are also rich in forestry resources. The development of Himalayan resources, including water, power, forestry and mineral resources, holds the potential for making up some of the resource deficiencies of the region and for benefiting five countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan. While a dispassionate consideration of the relevant issues at the levels of planning may help removing the avoidable impediments, this development which would warrant very large resources and very closer cooperation amongst the countries can be undertaken under mutually agreed international arrangements.

6. Another important area where wider regional cooperation is possible is the sea-bed resources of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh Pakistan and Maldives. It is worthwhile to mention in this context that the Law of the Sea conference convention signed on 10 December 1982 has made the necessary international framework for exploration of these vital natural resources. Besides, the existing bilateral agreements between India and Sri Lanka and that between Bangladesh and India for joint scientific exploitation of the resources of sea prepared the groundwork for initiating scientific schemes to joint ventures in this new field of activities. It will be in the interest of the concerned countries of South Asia to chalk out some programmes on regional basis in this field of harnessing the available scientific and technological expertise to make the best possible utilization of the rich seabed resources on convenient and suitable terms to be mutually agreed upon. For proper utilisation of these natural resources, the South Asian countries if
need arises, may work jointly in collaboration with the foreign countries who have experienced such scientific work in the past.

7. Another important area is energy which can be explored on regional basis. The idea of cooperation in such field was first mooted in the historic Bandung Conference (25 April, 1955) of the Afro-Asian Countries and that has recently been endorsed in the non-aligned conferences. Energy in South Asian countries is primarily oil-based and despite the prohibitive price of oil they have been compelled to adopt this. To overcome the problem of energy a South Asia Community may undertake a master plan for a common energy grid. This common energy grid can be based on hydro-electricity produced by Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and gas produced by Pakistan and Bangladesh, and thermal power generated by India. Such a common grid may cover the whole of South Asia and be of immense benefit to all countries concerned. The possibility of exploring the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purpose may also be taken into consideration. Over and above, there is immense potential and necessity of a coordinated effort in the region for combating flood and other natural calamities which so often devastates the region in general.

8. Within the region an important area which warrants regionwide agreements and may not be much difficult to achieve is the sector of foodgrains. Deficits in this area in which production is still heavily dependent upon weather conspires against the very survival of mankind in the region. A regional food policy beneficial to all may be chalked out and like the “ASEAN Food Security Reserve” a scheme worked out besides common quarantine ring to protect livestock and plants from pest and diseases along with pooling the resources for basic research and technology development.

9. No less promising is the scope of cooperation between the members of the South Asian regional countries in the field of sports, arts and culture. The inclusion of this area in SARC activities in the foreign Secretaries Conference held in Islamabad in August 1982 manifests no doubt the farsighted thinking of lea-
ders of SARC countries and in its own merit it is a significant decision. The basic reality of the common cultural values and heritage that remained dormant during these period will get enlivened with closer cooperation and activities in specific fields such as films, cultural exchange, regional games and sports, fine arts, literature, handicrafts and many other fields of this nature. Participation by the people of various walks of life and cultural activities from the member countries of SARC will go a long way in pervading cultural identities of South Asia with modern progressive moorings and ethos which will surely overcome the forces of obscurantism and reaction which creates impediment in the development of its regional identity. "Active cooperation in arts and culture has also a direct bearing on the security and stability of the region."

The regional cooperation process will gain new impetus and momentum with the active involvement of the conscious and articulate non-governmental sections of the societies of the member states such as academics and scholars, journalists, businessmen, scientists, technicians, cultural organisations, artists, etc. When activated, besides the impact of these groups as powerful lobby and pressure groups on the government to keep them committed to regional cooperation, they will slowly and progressively gear the political factors in the cherished direction.

10. A great potential for cooperation in South Asia lies in the field of educational and scientific research, and on subjects of common concern and interest. It is not difficult to come to an understanding on the establishment of common research services as it does not involve any surrender of sovereignty on the part of the participating countries. There is a great opportunity for coordination among research institutions in the region on various disciplines which can be utilized for the overall economic development of the region. New research organisations co-ordinated at regional level may also be set up. Priority may be given to the following areas:

a. Marine Fisheries Research
b. Fresh Water Fisheries Research
c. Medical Research
d. Research on Tropical diseases
e. Industrial Research
f. Agriculture and Forestry Research
g. Veterinary Research

Besides establishment of centres like South Asian Regional Institute, University of South Asian Studies, Regional Institutes on history, arts, culture, languages etc. may be encouraged to create an environment of concerted efforts to foster common affinity and cohesion among the peoples of the region. Though it involves a long term initiative, a beginning by itself would mark a step forward to South Asian regionalism. Furthermore, interaction between the academics, scientists and scholars and the research organisations and institutions of this area by undertaking and promoting studies, research and dissemination of knowledge on national and regional issues, governmental policies in national and international fronts, may also enhance the process of growth of regionalism. Institution of common programmes and coordination of educational and training facilities may prevent duplication of investment in a wide range of such activities. An added advantage of such cooperative activities is that agreement and cooperation on a regional basis will hardly be adversely affected by the difference in the levels of development of or economic strength of individual countries.

11. South Asia has some of the world’s best centres of tourist attraction which could be developed further to earn foreign exchange and also promote intra-regional relations. Transport systems of the region may be developed to link the whole region by introducing zonal trains, buses or air routes like the European network of transport routes. A South Asian Bus Service may be introduced. South Asian rail passes and air travel concessions may be introduced. It is heartening to note that the three-day meeting of the Technical Committee on Transport of SARC held in Male in the month of December 1984, discussed the proposal
for linkage of SARC capitals by airways and decided to set up a multi-sectoral Regional Training Academy covering all sectors of transport at a suitable place within SARC countries for which international help and assistance if necessary would be sought soon.  

12. Last but not the least is possible cooperation between the member countries in a highly sensitive and complex area not included in the current programme. Internal and external security is a major issue in South Asia. It is rightly argued that it "is not possible to pursue cooperation in economic, social and cultural fields beyond a certain limit in the absence of political understanding and harmony in the region." Though the degree of limits is yet to be seen the fact remains that irrespective of their various types of political systems, the member states are facing nearly similar type of internal political challenges. The internal disorder and insurgency of one type or the other are some of the problems faced by the member states which they are to combat. Further to these constraints, they are to mobilize popular support for specific political action in the face of growing economic hardship and social unrest which are gradually becoming difficult to tackle.

The geographical compulsions and the historical evouluation of South Asia created some basic similarity in the security needs of the countries of the region. A great Indian theorist Kautilya, stated the operating principle for all states as being: "don’t trust your neighbour who is your natural enemy, but rather look for support from the states beyond who are your natural allies, or as a supplementary principle, if you have to be surrounded by two or more larger states, play them off against each other". This strategy has been demonstrated in the history of South Asian countries relations till the present day. Political discord, more than anything else has vitiated the basic similarity of the security approach of these countries. On the other hand the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, setting up of the Rapid Development Force (RDF) by the US in the Middle East and Persian Gulf or arms proliferation
and great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean have caused new security threat which warrants the South Asian Countries to work for a coordinated and harmonized approach for their security. The perspective on security issues in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan is similar to that of Pakistan in that the major problem for each is their relationship with India rather than with external powers. All except Bhutan have sought to use external powers as counterbalances to India. It is pertinent now that the role of major external powers involved in South Asia have rarely been decisive. “A certain degree of shared security, economic, political and ideological interests among nation-states seems indispensable and where their shared interests were present, regionalism as an alternative to global cooperation has been successful”. Thus, some form of agreement with India on security as well as other regional issues is seen as unavoidable. When conflict and dissensions will be considerably minimized with some political and strategic harmony, the South Asian inter-state relations will assume new dimension and new opportunities will be opened up for SARC.

CONCLUSION

SARC is just in its budding stage for the fact that only recently it has taken off from primary phase of launching and gathered momentum so as to start yielding benefits. There has not been much of a spectacular achievement in any field of its activities, except the “preparatory build up” that comprises the activities of the technical and other committees. It is only now onwards, when the process enters into a post preparatory build-up stage that the real impact of interaction between SARC countries and a careful weighing of the potentialities of and impediments to regional cooperation in South Asia would be felt. The members of SARC will have to respect and follow the logic of hard regional realities in socio-economic and politico-strategic matters without compromising their legitimate interests. But mere realization and eagerness will not help much if the countries involved fail to approach matters with the determination to create
an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of each other’s problems. Nevertheless, SARC exercises carried out for the last four years have been able to provide, though imperceptibly, a new impetus to better bilateral and regional understanding.

In view of the differing politico-strategic environments it is not realistic to expect a cooperative regional economic system in South Asia similar to the EEC or partly the ASEAN model. However, the overall trend in the past few years has been towards expanding regional economic cooperation in South Asia and significant changes in the attitudes of all South Asian governments on their international relationships in the late 1970s has been visibly demonstrated. To date this trend has been primarily reflected in bilateral agreements that have substantially expanded relations between India and other states of the region. This change in attitude is still very fragile and subject to a reversion of past hostilities and suspicions unless carefully nourished, particularly in India. The interstate relations in South Asia of 1980s being qualitatively different from that of 1947, there is now a foundation on which the regional organization can work with greater prospect of success. The success of the regional approach will also largely depend on the responses of the other South Asian Countries in view of their perception of India’s policies and objectives.

No consensus on a regional system has been possible for a wide variety of reasons and it is only in the 1980s that for the first time South Asia appears to be more compact as a region—a situation congenial for regional cooperation. South Asia’s own commitment to evolve itself into an autonomous and independent example of regional cooperation is the first precondition. Most regional systems, other than those based upon satellite relationships don’t have a core member of disproportionate size and power. Examples may be cited of the European Economic Community, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Arab League and the Organization of African Unity. But peculiarity with the South Asia region is that India is disproportionately endowed with advan-
tageous conditions in all respects. As such it is only through a policy of ‘give and take’ attitude that will open the way for building a genuine interdependence in the region.

In conclusion it would be apt to say that it is unrealistic to imagine a situation in the global context where intra-regional interactions in South Asia, can be kept completely insulated from the impact of world economic, political and strategic forces. At the same time, the attempts of the extra-regional powers to distort or subvert the endeavour to build indigenous and genuine regional cooperation through economic penetration, political destabilisation and conflict precipitation demands to be resisted. The South Asian regionalism can evolve as a model of real collective self-reliance, if the statesmen of the South Asian countries tackle the extra regional influences which warrant skillful diplomacy and sense of unity and purpose in pursuing the cherished objectives. In the words of Late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, “Let us not be disheartened if we have some difficulties and differences to contend with. We are at the beginning of what promises to be a useful journey, our very cooperation will increase our capacity to withstand pressures”. The shared desire for regional cooperation as has been manifest from the launching of the SARC will hopefully generate the required efforts and surely give substance to the ideal to overcome the difficulties and differences in the way of the fruitful implementation of their desire. To expect unanimity in all things would be both unrealistic and unproductive. What is required most is the will of working together, if not in unison, then in harmony, for advancement of the interests and indeed strengthening the political, social and economic independence of the peoples of this region. It is imperative that the member countries of South Asian Regional Cooperation join hands in promoting confidence and cooperation amongst themselves. Together they have a common stake in the preservation of peace and security in South Asia.
NOTES


5. For details see, *The Bangladesh Observer*, Dhaka, 25 December 1984


9. Quoted from *SARC Documents*, New Delhi, 1983.