Regional Cooperation and Regional Stability in South Asia

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Development and peace are two major issues in the world today. For the developing countries, which were under long colonial captivity in the past and are still suffering from the yoke of old international economic order, these two issues appear even more acute. The developing countries badly need to develop their national economies, in order not only to consolidate their hardwon independence, but also to make independence more meaningful to their people, that is, to increasingly improve the quality of their life. Hence, a peaceful and stable international as well as regional environment is needed.

1. Regional Co-operation is a World Trend

After the World War II, a number of subjugated nations having broken up the colonialist shackles, sprang up like mushrooms with independent new looks in Asian and African continents. In this historical movement of national liberation, the South Asian countries marched in the forefront. Having achieved political independence, most of these countries took up the road of developing their national economies. In this respect, the achievements of the South Asian countries are remarkable too. Especially in recent years, when many African and Latin American countries, under the impact of the economic crisis of the capitalist world, are bogged down in serious difficulties, the economic situation in South Asia, like that of Southeast Asia, is very encouraging indeed.
At the threshold of the 1960s, the emergent independent countries gradually got together to make joint efforts to develop their national economies and seek an equitable and reasonable position in the world economic system. This joint effort took on various forms varying from bilateral, multilateral, sub-regional and regional cooperations to the cooperation on a global scale. So far, there exist more than two dozens of such regional or even larger scale organisations. Their activities have provided the developing countries with a lot of valuable practical experiences. The Group of 77, formed during the first UN Conference on Trade and Development in 1964, has served as a global body for the cooperation and coordination among the developing countries. The Declaration and the Programme of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, adopted by the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly in 1974, summed up their experiences of a decade’s struggle. The developing countries have come to realise the great significance of the South-South cooperation for promoting the establishment of a New International Economic Order. They have been making sustained efforts in that direction in the United Nations as well as on the platform of the Non-alignment Movement. During the past decade, with the South-North dialogue in stalemate due to the stubborn stance on the part of the superpowers, the South-South cooperation has become more important than ever before. The developing countries have not only made clear the goals of their struggle, but also spelled out 'code of conduct' to guide appropriate relationship among themselves. In the aforesaid struggles waged by the developing countries in international arena, whether they are in the UN, in the Group of 77 or in the Non-alignment Movement, the South Asian countries have played an important role and made great contributions. In respect of their own regional cooperation, however, the South Asian countries, owing to various reasons, have for a long time lagged behind those in other regions.
2. SARC in Steady Progress

With the advent of the 1980s, South Asian Regional Cooperation has at last made a good start under the active sponsorship of Bangladesh. This filled the gap in regional cooperation of the developing countries.

Since the late President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman initiated a proposal for establishing SARC in May 1980, with preparatory work carried out at Foreign Secretary’s level which lasted for more than three years. SARC was at last brought into existence on August 2, 1982, when the Declaration and the Integrated Programme of Action were adopted at the First Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of seven South Asian countries. We are glad to see the progress that the South Asian countries have made in their efforts for regional cooperation. Under the monitoring of the Standing Committee as well as the Technical Committees and Action Committees, in accordance with the Integrated Programme of Action, the aspirations of the peoples of these countries are gradually coming true.

We believe that the objectives and principles of the SARC, as outlined in the Declaration, can be fulfilled through joint efforts. It will help strengthen collective self-reliance, promote welfare of the people and improve the quality of their life, through fully exploring the potentialities of each of the seven countries, by co-operating actively and helping each other in economic, social, cultural, scientific and technological fields. Politically, it will promote mutual understanding and trust through regional cooperation. A more important role will be played on international forums through mutual coordination on matters of common interest.

The Code of Conduct unanimously adopted by all member nations, include such ground rules as: that the SARC shall be based on sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of other states and mutual benefit; that SARC shall be a complement to, instead of a substitution of, bilateral and multilateral cooperations; and shall not
be inconsistent with bilateral and multilateral obligations; that all decisions of the SARC at different levels shall be made on the basis of unanimity; that bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the SARC deliberations; that the financial cost of the programmes of cooperations will be contributed by the member nations voluntarily and that external assistance may be accepted with the approval of the Standing Committee, etc. These provisions have so far guaranteed the SARC to smoothly proceed its activities. The advance of the SARC which reflects the common aspirations of the South Asian countries as a whole, proves that the South Asian countries are capable of finding ways and means to overcome difficulties, eliminate obstacles and march on along the path of regional co-operation so long as they are ready to seek common grounds while reserve their differences.

3. Inter-relations Between Regional Cooperation and Regional Peace and Stability

All the South Asian countries are eager for development, peace and stability, despite this or that sort of controversies. The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, has appropriately chosen such topic as “SARC: A Socio-Economic Approach to Peace and Stability in South Asia” for this symposium, thus linking development with peace and stability. This point of view is shared by other South Asian countries. Similarly, President Mamoon Abdul Qayoom of the Maldives has put the two together in his recent appeal at the Second Meeting of the SARC Foreign Ministers for a summit to discuss “matters of relevance to the stability and progress of the region as a whole”. The Pakistan Foreign Minister, Sahabzada Yaqub Khan has said on one occasion, “We regard regional cooperation as a vehicle for the establishment of mutual confidence and promotion of good neighbouring relations in the region...” He added that regional cooperation “would not only further the economic and social well-being of our people but in safeguarding thereby the stability of our own region, make a signal contribution to the preservation of international peace and security.” The late
Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India in her inaugural address to the First Meeting of SARC Foreign Ministers on August 1, 1983, expressed a similar idea when she said, “We had our political differences in the past or have even now, but economic cooperation will give a strong impetus to closer friendship and greater stability in South Asia.”

Development, progress, peace and stability are inseparable to each other. Only in peace and stability, development and progress can be made possible. Only with economic development and betterment of people’s livelihood can there be social stability. Conversely, without social and regional stability, peace as well as development are out of the question. These aspects interact each other. And regional cooperation may serve as a powerful tie to push these interactions to develop in a positive direction.

4. Our Best Wishes

China is a socialist developing country. We always hold the view that the developing countries share common fundamental interests. We in China need peace and development as much as other developing countries do. We place socialist modernisation as the first priority in our domestic work. Our target by the end of the century is to quadruple the annual gross value of industrial and agricultural output of 1980. As a requisite for reaching this goal, we strive to seek an environment of international lasting peace.

The South Asian sub-continent lies to the south of our boundary. All the South Asian countries are our friendly neighbours. Based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, our relations with them are growing ever more cordial and amiable. Peace and stability in South Asia conform with our common interest. We wish to see all the South Asian countries to score still more successes in their economic reconstructions. We have consistently supported South Asian Regional Cooperation. Premier Zhao Ziyang has more than once declared this stand of our Government. At the very beginning of the founding of the SARC,
Premier Zhao unambiguously expressed his support during his tour of South Asia in the summer of 1981. In the mid-August of 1983, after the formal inauguration of the SARC, Premier Zhao talking to a special envoy from Sri Lanka, expressed again his wish that “South Asian countries strengthen their regional cooperation and live in harmony.” We have been all along attaching much importance to our economic cooperation with the developing countries. A few years ago, Premier Zhao Ziyang advanced four principles to govern our mutual economic cooperations, namely, “equality and mutual benefit, stress on practical results, diversity in form, and common progress.” They are a summary of our past experiences as well as our new development efforts. It is my conviction that they will certainly help further develop our economic and technical cooperations with South Asian countries and the South Asian region as a whole.