SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR PEACE AND STABILITY

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The dawn of 1980 has witnessed the beginning of a new era of cooperation between the seven countries of South Asia. Unlike the international arena where political environment has progressively been deteriorating, the community of South Asian nations has initiated modest but resolute measures to launch a scheme of regional cooperation. Their aim is to gradually promote cooperation amongst themselves in economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields. Their purpose is to overcome problems of backwardness and underdevelopment. Their hope is that the mutual cooperation in non-political fields will generate a climate of good will and understanding and promote peace and prosperity in this part of the world.

A new optimism of Asian solidarity was infused by the end of colonial rule and the emergence of new states onto the world stage. The parallel interests and objectives of the new states which were, more often than not, least adaptive for institutionalised cooperation soon diffused this enthusiasm. Preservation and consolidation of their hard-won sovereignty was the most immediate and supreme objective of the new nation-states. The institutionalised regional cooperation on the other hand was seen to impose limitations on sovereignty. The perceived gulf was so wide that it became virtually impossible for most of the governments to bridge it. What could have been more dear to the nation-states than the image of their national identity and viability? Then, the protection of
their infant national industries has always been an overrid-
ing concern in their policy-making, indeed, a constant factor. Besides, strict bipolarity and the accompanying cold war not only further aggravated the existing geostrategic and political concerns but they also dispelled the possibilities of economic co-operation.

Regionalism as a viable alternative, therefore, could only gain ground gradually. The loosening of bipolarity and the thaw in the cold war apart, the growing confidence in their nationhood and economic awareness stemming from the worsening terms of trade in the international market and the consequent mounting debts - all have been instrumental in the growing determination that a mutually beneficial framework for regional cooperation can, and should be, achieved. The situation in many Afro-Asian nations began to change from the 1960s. South Asia, nevertheless, has been particularly aversive to the initiative for, and even the very idea of, regional cooperation. Here the situation began to change in the early 1970s, partly because of global compulsions and mainly because of regional developments. Simla Agreement of 1972 between India and Pakistan and otherwise generally improving bilateral relations between the South Asian states provided foundations in transforming a tension-charged atmosphere into a neighbourly remission.

An institutionalised South Asian Regional Co-operation, however, had to await late President Ziaur Rahman's initiative. General Ziaur Rahman not only personally discussed the idea while visiting Pakistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka during 1977-80, but he also sent personal letters and envoys to the heads of the seven South Asian governments. The Working Paper, identifying potential areas of cooperation sent to the regional capitals, was evidently marked by optimism and determination to overcome legacies of history, the logics of geography, legends of power and divergence in perceptions: "In South Asia...we have countries at different levels of development, some are relatively less developed than others...(but) the countries
of South Asia also share many common values that are rooted in their social, ethnic, cultural and historical traditions; perception about certain specific events or political situation of the world may differ, but such differences do not seem to create a gulf between them that can’t be bridged”. The first meeting, at Foreign Secretaries level, held in Colombo in the summer of 1982, was considered to be a “determined attempt” on part of participating nations to establish a forum of regional cooperation. The Joint Communiqué announced not only the acceptance of the principles of unanimity and step by step approach, but also formation of five Study Groups and a Committee of the Whole. The Kathmandu meeting, in November the same year, apart from accepting the recommendations of the Study Groups, identified three more areas for cooperation. It was in August 1982, however, that the Foreign Secretaries declared in Islamabad, in their Joint Communiqué, that the process of regional cooperation has acquired an “irreversible momentum”. By their fourth meeting, held in Dhaka in March 1983, the Foreign Secretaries were in a position to announce that the South Asian Regional Cooperation will be launched by the Foreign Ministers of seven South Asian Countries in Delhi in August 1983. The Joint Declaration of Delhi Conference emphasised that the cooperation should, on the one hand, “be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of other states and benefit” and on the other, it should “not be a substitute for bilateral and multilateral cooperation” and should be based on mutual trust, understanding and sympathetic appreciation of the national aspirations”.

In the course of just over four years SARC has developed a respectable network of technical and action committees comprising of technical experts and policy administrators. All these are guided by a governing body called the Standing Committee consisting of the Foreign Secretaries. This impressive network now covers a broad spectrum of nearly a dozen areas of activities. Given time, resources and continually
strengthening will of the members, this dynamic process will feed upon itself. Viewed in the realm of South Asian realities, these by no means are mean achievements. The process of regional cooperation in South Asia will grow step by step, tempered by caution.

At the same time, some significant areas have not been included so far in the identified areas of cooperation. Trade and other specific economic and cultural issues have not been addressed. Private visits and interaction in non-governmental sectors still have to earn an upward trend. The most important decision-making level remains that of the Standing Committee, occupied by the Foreign Secretaries. No permanent Secretariat has been set up so far. It has been suggested that SARC needs a mechanism which could redress bilateral conflict situations. Many more areas for cooperation have been suggested by scholars and analysts. One can, indeed, add a long list to these suggestions. Indeed, one can go so far as to say that it remains a South Asian Regional Cooperation and has yet to earn the status of an 'Organisation', or of an 'Association', or of a 'Community'. But must we spread and thin our resources? Whatever has been achieved cannot be brushed aside as inconsequential. Our perspective must be long-term, pragmatic and realistic. Once we consolidate our gains, we can march along the road of South Asian development more confidently.

In South Asia, we have countries at different levels of development. Some are more developed than others; or let me put it more bluntly, some are poorer than others. Of some 900 million souls inhabiting the area, over 50 percent live on bare subsistence, and some 70 percent are below the absolute poverty line. Millions of crawling babies need clean water, hygienic food, clothing, and life-saving medicines. Let's accept that we have the poorest of the world with us. The economic situation of the region is characterised by, as the Marga Institute survey noted, "The persistence of the problems of low rates of economic growth, high rates of population growth, heavy pressures of
population on land, scarcity of natural resources, under-utilisation of large manpower resources and high incidence of poverty, income inequalities, illiteracy and infant mortality, low expectation of life at birth, lack of safe water supplies for large proportions of population, recurring food shortage in spite of the predominance of agriculture in the economies of the region, excessive dependence on agriculture in the economies of the region, excessive dependence of agriculture on weather, adverse terms of trade, heavy balance of payments deficits, high costs of oil imports, heavy debt service burden, Government’s expansionary fiscal and monetary policies and inflation remaining at double digit figures in most countries”. Therefore, the capacity of the regional countries to export capital is evidently non-existent. During 1983-84 all the seven countries together contributed barely over one million dollars for the South Asian Regional Cooperation. The situation for 1984-85, unfortunately, is not any different. The scope of economic cooperation thus far, therefore, has been understandably limited to a few areas.

The development and expansion of intra-regional trade is also constrained by another characteristic of South Asia; the obvious geographical and economic disparities coupled with the absence of complementarity and presence of competitiveness in the South Asian regional economies.

India’s population is three times more than the combined population of all the regional states and it is nearly eight times bigger than Bangladesh, the second most populous state. In area, India occupies 72 percent of the total area and is four times larger than Pakistan, the second largest state in the region. In economic development too, especially in industrialisation, India is far ahead of other countries. It is known to have virtually 100 percent of the total resources of the region in respect of uranium, iron ore, bauxite, copper, gold, lead, manganese, silver, tungsten, zinc, asbestos and diamonds, and more than 90 percent of the resources in coal, crude petroleum, chromium manganosite and
salt. India’s GNP is 78 percent of the total of South Asia. Its massive economy would tend to dominate the smaller economies, it is mistrusted by the smaller states, unless appropriate safeguards are designed to protect the interests of participating countries and ensure balanced interdependence. Let me also say that although India is among the top 15 industrial nations, has nuclear power and a large pool of skilled scientists, engineers and administrators, it is among the poorest countries in the world - with over 50 percent of the population below the poverty line and 64 percent of the people illiterate. This is a dual, contradictory image of India. And this, I hope, may help us understand why India stands as much in need of regional cooperation as any other South Asian state.

The difference in the levels of development and other economic disparities have led to divergent views on economic issues and in identifying courses which would result in the economic betterment of all states involved in the process. The process of economic cooperation must, therefore, be carried out benevolently to ensure that the weak are not exploited and that the strong do not dominate. It should be mutually beneficial and meaningful, irrespective of existing disparities.

These economic disparities, and particularly in the production of capital goods between India on the one hand and the rest South Asian countries on the other, gives birth to apprehensions about the perceived role of India among the smaller countries of the region. It is often feared that the removal of all trade barriers could result in some countries selling primary commodities against manufactured goods from India. Who would like to become a dependent partner, or “the village of South Asia” in the name of regional cooperation? Indeed, the South Asian Regional Cooperation will have to devise a system which ensures the participating nations that the process of regional interdependence will not result, in any way, in permanent dependency relationship. Again to quote the Marga Institute survey, “economic dependence can result in political dependence and countries jealous of
their independence cannot contemplate such relationship with equanimity”. Given its wealth of resources, size of economy and geographical disposition, the responsibility of initiative falls on the Indian shoulders.

The caution and reservation which characterises the regional cooperation can also be explained by the divergence of opinions on bilateral and international issues dividing the community of South Asian nations.

Despite the unending attempts at rapprochement between India and Pakistan, relation between the two states are regrettably far from satisfactory. The two countries have yet to resolve their main issue of contention, i.e., the Kashmir dispute, for more durable and just peace in the region. Islamabad’s peace offensive apart, the Indian Prime Minister’s somewhat positive note after his electoral victory, lends vitality to my optimism. Already, talks on Pakistan’s proposal of No War Pact and Indian proposal of Friendship Treaty have taken place, and the two countries have set-up a Joint Commission. Whether they sign both, the No War Pact and the Friendship Treaty, or neither, sovereign rights of either party should not be compromised; neither should their security perceptions, defence needs, economic or political cooperation should be smeared by unreasonableness. Credibility can be established by demonstrating a greater appreciation of changed geomilitary and geostrategic milieu in the wake of over one hundred thousand troops along Pakistan’s northern borders, apart from, of course, taking other confidence-building measures.

Bhutan and Nepal, two of the seven South Asian nations are land-locked. Their almost total dependence on India for transit facilities, and India’s unfailing aversion has for long been perturbing them. Secure, uninterrupted and relatively cheap transit rights would not only contribute to their better bilateral relations with India and in increased trade relations with the other regional countries, but would also ease some of their foreign exchange problems. Other irritants exasperating Indo-Nepal relations include their difficult-to-administer common borders leading
to problems such as smuggling, unauthorised movement of nationals and India's displeasure of Nepal seeking international help to harness some of its natural resources. In the realm of regional affairs, Nepal does not approve the view which considers Nepal as India's security zone in the Himalayas. Moreover, King Birendra's proposal that Nepal be accepted as a Zone of Peace by its neighbours, already endorsed by some 55 countries, ironically, so far has not been accepted by India.

Indo-Bangladesh relations are also marred with tensions over a host of issues like the lease of the Tin Bigha Corridor, lack of agreement on railway transits, differences on the maritime boundary. Irritants like fencing frontiers between the two states remain political as well as a psychological stumbling block. The question of sharing and harnessing the Ganges waters also continues to adversely affect their bilateral relations. To its regional dimension is the understanding between Bangladesh and Nepal—the source of the Ganges water—on development and harnessing of the water resources for irrigation, power, river navigation, flood control and such other uses. India's opposition to the inclusion of Nepal in the Indo-Bangladesh negotiations on issue of the Ganges water may be in line with Indian repugnance to internationalisation of outstanding 'bilateral' matters, but unfortunately it continues to plague the South Asian scene.

Sri Lanka's relations with India are beset by the Tamil question. Of late, relations between the two states have been fast deteriorating amid accusations and counter-accusations particularly in the backdrop of Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) links in India. Regionally, like Nepal's proposal of Nepal as Zone of Peace, Sri Lankan proposal of Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace continues to sour their relations.

This quick survey of unwarranted state of affairs in South Asia, however, is not to imply that the community of South Asian nations cannot overcome its difficulties and that it is deemed to live in an environment of mistrust and dispute. But only to emphasise that as the post-independence generation is now nearing the
effective decision-making levels, opportunities exist that we set our priorities right. The new generation has not experienced the bitterness of past and can address itself many of the problems more creatively which was not the obvious characteristic of the pre-independence generation.

Second reason for arresting your attention to India's relations with neighbouring countries is to highlight the inherent uniqueness of South Asia as region. Though various degrees of disparities can be found in many other areas, but unlike any other region of the world South Asian core is represented by only one state while the periphery consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. If we agree and consider Bhutan and Nepal as forming part of the core, then the periphery would include Afghanistan (traditionally, security zone of South Asia), Burma (sharing the same colonial experiences), and China (whose South Asian frontiers stretch from Sinkiang to Tibet). We will revert to the China factor a little later, but suffice it to state at this stage that there is no generally accepted academic definition of a region as a scholar has put it, "In the real world, the decision to assign any one set of boundaries to any one region is an evaluative or political decision, and it can and does change according to political circumstances."

It is interesting to note that another expert on the subject has offered five characteristics which comprise a region, (a) social and cultural homogeneity, (b) shared political attitudes and behaviour, (c) political interdependence in the form of shared institutional memberships, (d) economic interdependence, and, (e) geographical proximity. If we agree with this paradigm, then what 'region' has been there in South Asia?

If viewed from the capital of any of our nation-states, countries surrounding it would constitute its periphery. Each nation's world view is more likely to place itself in the centre and rest of the world around it. Pakistan, first the birth place and then the melting-pot of the Indian civilisation, having relations with and contribution in the neighbouring Central Asian, Persian and
Messopotamian Civilisations, for example, finds herself today intrinsically involved in a leading role in the Islamic World. Likewise, each nation-state, other considerations apart, may be more inclined to interact more intensely with its own periphery than with some static, watertight 'region'. This pattern of state behaviour and the regional cooperation in South Asia are not mutually exclusive, but are reinforcing and, therefore, should not be frowned upon.

Conversely, all of smaller states have been able to evolve friendly bilateral relations amongst themselves, viewed warily by India. Sometimes it is construed as 'ganging-up of the periphery against the centre'. But is there anything tangible the 'periphery' could achieve either by confronting or by by-passing the 'centre'?

Concurrently, parallel interests have been taking shape in South Asia. If Pakistan's religious, cultural, economic and political bonds with the Islamic countries have been continuously strengthening in West Asia, then on the other side, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives at one stage or another, have shown varying degrees of fascination for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Likewise, of the region's seven countries if five share their frontiers with India and none with each other, it should also be appreciated, four share their frontiers with the People's Republic of China. That is, for most of us, India and China are the only common neighbours—neighbours with whom our economic and cultural linkages are rooted in antiquity. For the last so many decades now that relations between the South Asian nations, be they landlocked like Nepal or Island nations like Sri Lanka, and the People's Republic of China have continuously been marked by an upward trend. Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—and now increasingly Maldives—have benefitted equally from their relations with China. And lately there has also been a welcome development of Sino-Indian border talks. China's South Asian policy has many a lesson for the superpowers in its folds. Viewed as a neighbourly,
friendly power in South Asia, China thus can contribute to the economic uplift of our community of nations.

Let me emphasise once again that the South Asian Regional Cooperation in true spirit to its Joint Declaration should not obstruct the existing bilateral and multilateral relations of the member nations. The regional cooperation should emerge as a positive, constructive force in generating a climate of goodwill and harmony conducive to a better understanding of what the countries in the region have in common. Shared perceptions are an important factor for the success of any regional cooperation. As regional cooperation grows, it feeds upon itself and generates a climate of understanding reducing the scope for, and role of, disparities and disputes. Though one day we will have to address our bilateral problems, let existing problems not block our way to overcome problems of poverty and backwardness.

In economic terms, all South Asian States belong to the Third World and the Non-Aligned Movement. We have the same basic interest with regard to the North-South dialogue and New International Economic Order. We are similarly suffering because of deterioration in the international terms of trade. It is only through increased regional understanding, and degree of coordination, that South Asia can hope to have an effective voice in international forums. Indeed, it is only by consolidating our institutional framework for consultation and coordination that nearly one-fifth of the world’s population inhabiting in this region can play a role commensurate with its intrinsic global importance.
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