



Global Advanced Research Journal of History, Political Science and International Relations ISSN: 2315-506X Vol. 3(3) pp. 030-034, May, 2014
Available online <http://garj.org/garjhpsir/index.htm>
Copyright © 2014 Global Advanced Research Journals

Review

SAARC: (Still) in Search of Regional Integration?

Jahangir Ahmad Khan

Research Scholar, School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Sector -30 Gandhinagar, Gujarat
India-382030.

E-mail: Jahangir0786khan@gmail.com; Contact No. 07818865842

Accepted 15 May, 2014

Regional integration is a process by which states enter into agreements to enhance cooperation through institutions and rules. The objectives of such agreements could be many. The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), which was established in 1985 after four years of sustained and difficult negotiations, is such an attempt at the integration of the subcontinent. Although there has been cooperation on issues that are seen to be peripheral in nature, these are inadequate to show that SAARC has bolstered regional unity and cooperation in the way it was envisaged to have. In this regard, it is compared with processes such as the ASEAN or the European Union (EU). Despite sustaining its official existence, it has had a chequered trajectory primarily because of the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan, the asymmetrical distribution of capabilities between the member states, the capital-centric approach to regional integration, and the inability of national regimes to view cross-border commonalities as nodes of cooperation between countries rather than sensitive zones that need to be securitised and fortified. SAARC countries are yet to evolve a practical framework and realistic terms of reference for cooperation on substantive matters on the basis of complementarity and mutual benefit. By revisiting the reasons for the lack of substantial progress of SAARC, this paper will review its recent trajectory and anticipate its future prospects. It will ask: what factors can contribute to, and effectively stabilise, regional cooperation? Can a shift from state security to human and cooperative security occur? Can economics trump politics in regional integration? Answers to these questions will help us appreciate the constraints on prospects of cooperation in South Asia.

Keywords: SAARC, Regional integration

Our hearts are lifted by the winds of rapprochement that are blowing across our region, raising hopes of a more durable environment of peace and stability within and among our states in South Asia (Speech delivered by the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan at the Twelfth SAARC Summit. AS cited in "Prospects of Social Charter among SAARC Countries", Abdul Qayum Mangi: 2005).

INTRODUCTION

The progress of nation-state is in full speed in Europe while its advancing has not got motion in Africa and Asia. Integration among distinct political components is a historical fact in Europe, but disintegration seems to be the prevailing design elsewhere (See Hass 1961). The

formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in mid-fifties marked the first step for a hitherto unseen process of regional integration in Europe. Only a few years after the finish of the Second World War did two of the previous main opponents in Europe, Germany

and France, agreed to cooperate and pool their production of steel and coal. In conjunction with four other countries of Europe – Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy and the Netherlands – the ECSC laid the keystone for a peaceful regional integration in Europe. This first mutual step resulted in the creation of the European Union (EU) with its now 28 member states. Sixty years after the successful creation of the ECSC other regional organizations have emerged almost in all continents, oftentimes inspired by the model of European integration. These regional organizations also cover a vast amount of different economic and political issues (Pfluger 2012). Cannot the example of fruitful integration in Europe be imitated? Could not the methods of international and supranational collaboration developed in Paris, Luxembourg, and Brussels be put to use on the other side of the globe particularly South Asia? Or, in a different angle, will not the progress of European unity inevitably have its integrating impacts in other regions even without efforts at conscious imitation (Hass 1961). European states may have conflicts but the mode of resolving conflicts among the European states has demonstrated that "there often comes a moment when there is a simultaneous revolution of interests on both sides and unity precipitates itself," to quote Mary Follett (As cited in Metcalf and Urwick, eds., *Dynamic Administration*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1940, P. 40).

The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), which was established in 1985 after four years of sustained and difficult negotiations, is such an attempt at the integration of the subcontinent. Although there has been cooperation on issues that are seen to be peripheral in nature, these are inadequate to show that SAARC has bolstered regional unity and cooperation in the way it was envisaged to have. In this regard, it is compared with processes such as the ASEAN or the European Union (EU). Despite sustaining its official existence, it has had a chequered trajectory primarily because of the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan, the asymmetrical distribution of capabilities between the member states, the capital-centric approach to regional integration, and the inability of national regimes to view cross-border commonalities as nodes of cooperation between countries rather than sensitive zones that need to be securitized and fortified.

Challenges to regional integration in South Asia

A light on regional challenges is a compulsory to explore new paths of cooperation in South Asia. No other regional organization is as geo-strategically speared as SAARC. Only one country shares a common border with and none of the others share a border with one another except one. In terms of population, military capability, GDP and almost all other parameters of national power,

the differences are vast. The differential of population between the largest and the smallest country is almost the 4,000 times. In South Asia even after agreeing to a less than open Free Trade Agreement for SAARC, there is unwillingness to award normal trade (Most Favoured Nation) status among countries (Pakistan's Cabinet finally agreed to the MFN in Nov 2011, fifteen years after India had granted it to Pakistan. It is hoped that actual implementation will not be another issue of contention. However, significant non-tariff barriers remain in place by both countries to prevent realization of the full potential of cross border trade).

Evolving a unified national identity and coming to terms with it, is an important condition for nationhood. This is mostly a painfully slow and difficult process in South Asia. It is an imperative also to form a government that best suits its identity and characteristics, within the basic arguments of democracy, howsoever defined. This has been hard to attain in many cases and remains incomplete. Defending and defining the frontiers of the state ideological or physical and is a huge challenge. If this concept is excessively securitized then the stress inevitably shifts to militarization with shocking human security implications and in turn affects national stability and development. Though all states in South Asia are now democratic in a realistic sense, a unique achievement, Sense of a Common History, culture and Single Economic Space, there is as yet no common history of the region that is accepted by all people of South Asia. There is urgent need to re-introduced the concept of a single economic space for South Asia, which it has always been history. This psychological barrier in the minds of decision makers and men of the region is necessary to put in place policies of regional cooperation that are important to prosperity (Banerjee 2012).

We can also see that larger countries of the region, particularly India, have refused to discharge the responsibility that devolves upon them for guaranteeing the success of the regional integration arrangement. Practice demonstrates that regional integration, mainly among developing countries, can succeed only if the economically stronger member states adopt procedures for enabling the weaker member states to derive equitable benefits from the process of integration. It is observed that the first wave of regionalism among developing countries collapsed mainly because of the refusal by the economically stronger member states to help weaker states (Dubey 2007).

India-Pakistan conflicts and hostility have impeded regional cooperation for decades. Even though there has been no big war or conflict between the two in the last 40 years (except Kargil), the state of military preparedness and hostility in both sides hamper cooperation in several ways. The Pakistani military establishment exercises a veto over policies with India. Two way transit between Afghanistan and India (two SAARC members) still is not allowed, thus denying all the benefits of trans-Asian Silk

Route from Bangladesh to Europe. The vast potential of this for commerce and trade is only now being understood, but is a dream far from realization. To deny all countries of South Asia the possibility of this route is to keep the region deliberately underdeveloped (Banerjee 2012).

When we look at the passage of SAARC over the last 28 years, it seems that the member states never intended to attain market integration or arrange the mechanism of regional cooperation for bringing prosperity to the people of the region and enhancing the welfare. Most of the pronouncements made and schemes launched were in the nature of a public relations workout to outsmart each other with a view to impressing the world outside and tricking the people of the region. The process of SAARC has thus been an exercise in competitive deception (Dubey 2007).

Factors which contribute to, and effectively stabilise, regional co-operation

The important factors affecting the regional cooperation can be discussed as. Geography; Physical contiguity certainly results in interaction. This, however, need not essentially be positive in content; interaction can be negative and confrontational, as the South Asian experience has shown. In the course of time, the wastage and futility of an adversarial relationship are realised, as exposed by developments in different parts of the world, especially since the 1970s, when a thaw in the cold war terminated in 1989 in a far-reaching transformation of international relations. New initiatives regional and groupings which have emerged, and are still emerging, confirm that the reason of geography, understood in terms of continental nearness or of the ocean rims, impels countries towards cooperative arrangements. The element of geography argues in favour of South Asian co-operation. It also raises questions on the definition of regions (See Jyotindra Nath Dixit 1997).

Mutually beneficial complementarity of the economies of the region; It is worth noting that the members of SAARC do not enjoy natural complementarities. They have more or less same limitations and same endowment. Notwithstanding all the developmental actions and steps taken for modernising and industrialising the economies of these countries, countries of the SAARC region have mostly agricultural economies with more or less similar agricultural product and crop patterns. In relations of people to land ratio, the situation is really difficult by the fact that high population density is coupled with widespread use of cultivable land, unlike, for example, Japan where population density is corresponding to intensive and optimal use of land (Ibid).

Ethno-cultural similarity provides an emotional, intellectual and social impetus to regional co-operation. There are both positive and negative components

affecting this dimension of South Asian cooperation. Linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural affiliations in South Asia surpass the national frontiers of the eight member countries. The similar religions are to be found in many of these countries. All this should be an effective impulse for co-operation. Ironically, it is the very commonality of religious and the ethno-cultural heritage which has created complications of national political identity among India's neighbours, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Despite the shared religious and socio-cultural inheritance, the contention of a separate political identity necessitates - and results in - countries of the region pulling back from processes of socio-cultural and economic interaction. Their apprehension of being marginalised by India remains a hindrance in the process of consolidating regional co-operation. Common ideas about the organisation of government, cohesiveness in terms of the institutional arrangement of the power structures of the states in the region and common values determining the political systems of countries in the region, add to the prospects of co-operation. South Asia has to struggle towards such cohesion, although there is some distance still to be concealed before the objective can be realised (Dixit 1997).

Prospects of Cooperation in South Asia

Though there are number of ways to promote cooperation in south SAARC countries. But I am focusing on economic and human security aspects. In the post-1990 period, there seems to be some vision among the South Asian leaders that the prospect of SAARC, like any other regional grouping, lies in concentrating on economic cooperation in specific areas (Dash 1996). Perhaps the only economic issue that come in the SAARC agenda during the early days was the need to fight poverty in the region and setting up of an independent commission to look into the matter in 1991. Poverty, too, was non-controversial and there was agreement on the issue. Other than poverty, during the first period of SAARC's operation, there were barely any methods taken to promote economic cooperation in the region (Kelegama 2007). The first bold step in the economic sector, particularly in the trade and commerce was the decision to have South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) and then the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) (Dwarika 2005). SAPTA is considered to be the main stepping-stone towards higher level of intra-regional trade liberalisation and economic collaboration among the member countries. SAPTA was initiated by Sri Lanka's suggestion of strengthening the intra-regional economic cooperation, concentrating mainly on the intra-regional preferential trading arrangements in terms of deeper tariff cuts and greater product coverage (Chowdhury 2005).

The propagation of regional trade agreements is fundamentally changing the world trade landscape. Today more than one third of global trade takes place among countries that have some form of mutual regional trade agreements. Trade agreements usually go beyond reducing tariffs to include measures to reduce trade impediments associated with border crossings and services regulations and standards customs as well as broader rules that expand the overall climate. The regional trade agreements can help encourage and reinforce broader improvements in domestic policy; they can be designed to contribute to a political atmosphere that is more conducive to stability, investment and growth. The SAFTA has to be strengthened and developed on these lines. The new interest in regional trade arrangements the world over is about using the potential of efficiency-seeking restructuring of the industry to take benefit on a pan-regional basis (Dwarika 2005).

The need for better economic co-operation between geographically contiguous countries has been a foremost feature of the global political economy ever since the beginning of the European Economic Community (EEC) in the late 1940s and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the 1960s. The logic for such co-operation has been strengthened further in the 1990s by the emergence of regional trading blocs like the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU) (Nuruzzaman 1999). There should be specific provisions in the SAFTA for the adoption of measures of deeper integration, such as cooperation for development of transport and other forms of infrastructure, granting of transit facilities, liberalisation of investment and trade in services, cooperation in the monetary and financial and coordination, if not harmonisation, of macroeconomic policies and programmes (Dubey 2007). According to Kher (2012) Like the ASEAN, SAARC needs to assume a central role in creating conditions for deeper integration by promoting trade, investment and transparency. The changing dynamics in the world economic order make this an opportune time for South Asian countries to change their approaches.

SAARC needs to chart a bottom up approach rather than a top down one. In this perspective good relations between the member countries can help regional cooperation rather than the other way round. Attempts should be made to form synergy among the people. The reason is that there is lack of connection between SAARC people and its agreements and laudable conventions have not impressed the lives of the people on whose behalf these announcements have been made. An economic *raison d'être* is a precondition for regional politics in a globalised world where regional cooperation is optional. The transnational character of problems relating to climate change, terrorism or drug trafficking cannot be addressed individually by states which share porous and, many a time, contested borders and un-demarcated. The countries of the region

recognize this but are yet to shuck their securitised state-centric mind-sets (Smruti 2010).

The notion of human security is relevant for its focus on the individual rather than the state. This can be applied to a region also. This is familiar to the notion propounded by human rights groups that human rights are not state rights and, further, that the human rights of many individuals are really more likely to be at risk from state authorities or agents than from any other. Unlike the traditional state-centric approach, the human security approach is open-ended, embracing notions of safety from threats like disease, hunger, environmental degradation and repression as well as 'protection from harmful and sudden disruptions in the patterns of daily life' (Lawson 2005).

Formulating a concept of human and cooperative security should stress human security, and could be a first step towards joint security coordination in place of rigid state security. Common security is based on mutual trust and trust is generated by engaging on humanitarian bases not boarders in practical cooperation. Member states must be ready to adopt new approaches. And it requires us to overcome mind-sets lingering on from the 20th century. SAARC states need to leave behind outdated thinking in terms of confrontation, zero sum games and spheres of influence. Security in the 21st century is means the security of humans, societies, infrastructure, and our energy supply. South Asian Common Security policy should rely more on people not boarders (Hashmi 2012).

A shift from state security to human and cooperative security approach might work in South Asia when it comes to solving human security related issues. South Asian countries are routinely ravaged by famines, floods, pandemics, hurricanes and many other forms of natural and man-made disasters that take a heavy human toll. Earthquake in India in 2011, floods in Pakistan in 2010, Tsunami in India, Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2004, Hurricane Sidr in Myanmar and Bangladesh took thousands of lives. Yet, South Asian nations do not have a device for dealing with natural disasters and human relief. As mostly all of them are after the state based tight security at the caste of insecurity of number of individuals. They lack cooperative instruments to deal with these problems. South Asia, despite its high population and common history and culture is one of the most poorly connected regions. This is because common mistrust has stopped countries of the region from giving priority to build multiple connectivity. The countries of the SAARC can also cooperate in tacking the challenges of energy, food and water security. South Asia faces the vast challenge of feeding its billions over the next decades. Agriculture, forestry and fishing are the mainstays of food security. South Asian states are suffering from energy scarcities and the picture is becoming increasingly grim by the day. These countries need a braver approach to cooperative security based on humanity not state, which

itself is for protection of humanity than has been the case so far. For instance, they can initiate a regular mechanism to discuss security issues in the regions like CSCAP, ARF, etc. Disaster management authorities, health ministers, finance ministers, environment ministers can meet regularly to discuss the ways and means to meet the mutual challenges of economic cooperation, disaster mitigation, public health issues and environmental security. What is vital is political will and broad vision to implement a cooperative security approach (Gupta 2011).

South Asia's choice between people and arms exemplifies the choices that each society needs to make today. National security becomes a mere illusion without human security. Human security is a revolutionary and powerful idea that forces a new morality on all of us. It is reflected every day in the shrivelled faces of innocent masses. Human security demands a new pattern of human development - development that is woven around the aspirations of the people, men and women alike. It requires a new pattern of global governance and development cooperation. Peace must not only be spoken about, it must be acted upon as well. Many trends in the international politics have changed. So let us take a turn for security which must be the protection and promotion of the people and not only the protection of the land (Soherwordi 2005).

CONCLUSION

Through maintaining the primacy of economic integration countries of the South Asian region can expect effective cooperation. Regional economic integration will ultimately enable the achievement of South Asia's principal goals of poverty reduction, peace, prosperity and social and human development. South Asian economies must conceptualize regional integration as an evolving process. SAARC has an explicit intent to travel in the direction of South Asian Economic Union. Recent achievement in the growth performance of the South Asian countries offers both challenges and prospects for deeper integration with the global economy. Though some steps are already taken in this direction. Further work is required on the trade effects and determinants of South Asian integration to overcome limitations (See Moinuddin, M. 2013).

South Asia's choice between people and arms exemplifies the choices that each society needs to make today. National security becomes a mere illusion without human security. It requires a new pattern of global governance and development cooperation. Peace must not only be spoken about, it must be acted upon as well. Many trends in the international politics have changed. So let us take a turn for security which must be the protection and promotion of the people and not only the protection of the land (See Soherwordi, Hussain Shaheed

(2005)). A shift from state security to human and cooperative security and a commitment that the economics should trump politics in region is the need of hour. The issues which SAARC countries are facing are not unique, other regional grouping like ASEAN were having almost the related issues but the only difference is that these groups first acted for higher goals, beyond the barriers and border for the common good of humans as whole, and other issues were taken later. So Stepping beyond past differences to attain the end objective of peace and stability, depicted by the Southeast Asian nations needs to be replicated in South Asia (See Kher 2012).

REFERENCES

- Banerjee Dipankar (2012). "Challenges and Opportunities for Cooperation in South Asia", in Tomislav Delinic and Nishchal N. Pandey (eds) *Towards a More Cooperative South Asia*, Centre for South Asian Studies: Kathmandu.
- Chowdhury Mamta B (2005). "Applied Econometrics and International Development", *Appl. Econ. and Int. Devel.* 5-4:23-40.
- Dash Kishore C (1996). "The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation in South Asia" *Pacific Affairs*, 69(2):185-209.
- Dhunge Dwarika (2005). "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Prospects for Development", *the Pak. Devel. Rev.* 43(4): 933-941.
- Dixit Jyotindra Nath (1997). "Problems and prospects of regional cooperation and security in south Asia: An Indian view", *Pacifica Rev.* 9(1):73-81.
- Dubey Muchkund (2007). "SAARC and South Asian Economic Integration", *Econ. and Polit. Weekly.* 42(14):1238-1240.
- Gupta Arvind (2011). *Will Cooperative Security Work in South Asia?* Institute for Defence studies and analysis. New Delhi.
- Haas Ernst B (1961). "International Integration: The European and the Universal Process", *Int. Organ.* 15(3):366-392.
- Hashmi Arshi Saleem (2012). *Envisioning a Regional Security Community*, Centre for South Asian Studies, Kathmandu.
- Kher Priyanka (2013). *Political Economy of Regional Integration in South Asia: Background Paper NO. RVC Kelegama, Saman* (2007), "Towards Greater Economic Connectivity in South Asia", *Econ. and Polit. Weekly.* 42(39):3911-3915.
- Lawson Stephanie (2005). "Regional integration, development and social change in the Asia-Pacific: implications for human security and state responsibility", *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 17(2):107-122.
- Moinuddin M (2013). *Fulfilling the Promises of South Asian Integration: Gravity Estimation.* ADBI Working Paper 415. Asian Development Bank Institute: Tokyo.
- Nuruzzaman Md (1999). *SAARC and Sub regional Co-operation: Domestic Politics and foreign policies in South Asia*, *Contemporary South Asia*, 8(3): 311-322.
- Obino Francesco (2009). *SAARC: The Political Challenge for South Asia and Beyond: Econ. and Polit. Weekly.* 28(9):118-125.
- Pattanaik Smruti S (2010). "SAARC at Twenty-Five: An Incredible Idea Still in Its Infancy", *Strategic Analysis*, 34(5):671-677.
- Pflüger Friedbert (2012). "The Regional Integration of Europe – A "Formula to Success"?", in Tomislav Delinic and Nishchal N. Pandey (eds) *Towards a More Cooperative South Asia*, Centre for South Asian Studies: Kathmandu.
- Soherwordi Hussain Shaheed (2005). "Human Security in South Asia: Military Expenditures Dimension of India and Pakistan", *Pakistan Horizon*, 58(1):35-46.
- Sonu Trivedi (2006). *SAARC-COMESA: Exploring South-South Co-operation*, *J. Devel. Soc.* 22:58-73.