



The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation: Problems and prospects

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Abstract: Regionalism has been an important force in international relations since 1945. Most regional organizations that came into existence after the end of the Second World War dealt primarily with defence and security issues. With the passage of time, however, regional trading blocs have considerably gained in importance. The aim of this article is to look at the only regional organization in South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The article argues that regionalism in contemporary South Asia has been problematic right from the start because South Asia has been plagued with ongoing conflicts both at the interstate level and at the domestic level. The main interstate conflict in South Asia has been the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, the two dominant forces in the region. Internal problems within India include the Maoist insurgency and secessionist movements in the Indian northeast. Pakistan has also struggled with major internal problems such as Islamist terrorism. Since these countries have been giving their time and attention to their internal problems, developing a unified approach to deal with regional problems and also a collective sense of identity has proven to be very problematic. These internal problems within the national boundaries of each of these South Asian countries and the interstate conflicts in the region especially between India and Pakistan have most certainly undermined regionalism in the past in South Asia, and continue to do so. Finally, the article takes a security studies approach whilst making an assessment of the SAARC.

Key words: South Asia, regionalism, SAARC, conflict, India, Pakistan

The growth of regionalism is predominantly a post-Second World War phenomenon and has been increasingly gaining importance in international relations. Usually, regional organizations in the past have been inspired by very specific aims. Some regional organizations are concerned mainly with trade and economics; some are more concerned with

defence and security whereas others are more concerned with the protection of cultural values. According to the realist approach in international relations, the political role of the hegemonic power is important in any particular region, whereas the neoliberal approach believes that states will behave rationally and enter into cooperative arrangements if they

have a chance of gaining from that particular cooperation. Most regional organizations in the post-1945 period dealt primarily with defence issues, particularly in a Cold War phase of rivalry, which related to different spheres of influence. In this connection, mention may be made of the NATO, SEATO, CENTO and the Warsaw Pact. In a globalized era, when countries are more concerned with absolute profits and the benefits associated with these profits, regional trading blocs have gained more importance with time, the most successful of which has been the European Union. Other regional bodies include the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADAC) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Whilst most regions came up with effective regional organizations, South Asia struggled to do so. In contrast to other geographical units of the world, the Indian subcontinent has had a much weaker sense of regional identity, although before 1947, the countries of South Asia were seen as one. South Asia is seen as a 'region without regionalism'. 'Contested national identities constructed by member states have not encouraged an identity based on common socio-cultural heritage to take root' (Patnaik, 2010). This was primarily because of the mistrust directed against the most dominant force in the region, India. India has not been particularly favourable to the idea of a 'regional cooperative venture' in South Asia and India's initial response to the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had at best been lukewarm (Nuruzzaman, 1999). It is the aim of this article to give readers an overview of regionalism in South Asia, a region of vital economic importance to the world now, primarily because of India's rise in global affairs. In doing so, the article argues that the South

Asian region has always had a weak sense of regional identity and this continues to be the situation even today. The article further argues that major security concerns in the subcontinent have prevented regionalism to act as a strong positive force. These security concerns include tensions between countries in the region at the interstate level as well as domestic security concerns. Thus, the article takes a strong security studies approach whilst making an assessment of the SAARC.

I The SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

1 The background

The SAARC consists of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives and Sri Lanka and has been South Asia's first and only regional body. South Asia 'is a cluster of countries with asymmetric economic and political profiles. India is the region's leader politically, economically, demographically and militarily' (Jabed, 2012). SAARC was a product of local efforts, and no outsider was involved in the process of its creation. This stands in stark contrast to other regional bodies from the past such as the SEATO and the CENTO. It has its headquarters at Kathmandu in Nepal, with Afghanistan being the most recent member, which joined in the year 2007. There is the possibility that the SAARC might expand further to include Myanmar (Patnaik, 2010). Also with regards to China, whilst it has observer status in the SAARC, along with a whole range of other countries, its case for full membership has been supported by Nepal and Pakistan, but not by India (Ahmar, 2011).

The aim of the SAARC was to find solutions to the common problems faced by the people of southern Asia, through friendship, mutual trust and understanding, and the aim was to create an order based on mutual respect, equality and shared benefit and to promote security and stability.¹ The aims of the SAARC have been to promote people's

welfare in southern Asia, promote economic growth and development and improve the quality of life, the promotion of socio-cultural development and it hopes to have the South Asian Economic Union by the year 2020. The aim is thus to promote socio-economic development in the agreed areas of cooperation in the member states, through joint action. The SAARC is thus the determination of the people of this region to cooperate regionally. The cooperation is based on the understanding of respecting the sovereign equality and territorial integrity of the member states, political independence and non-interference in internal/domestic affairs of the member states. The SAARC went through a phase of evolution and evolved in three distinct phases. The initial phase was when senior officials had an agreement of a basic framework of regional cooperation at Colombo, which was between the years 1981 and 1983. The foreign ministers met at New Delhi in the year 1983, and this is ordinarily associated with the second phase. This development elevated the whole process from the official to the political level with the launching of the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA). The third phase is when the heads of states met at the city of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1985.

The SAARC process began in the late 1970s, but reached a culminating point in the mid-1980s. The process was initiated by Zia ur Rahman, from Bangladesh. The agreed areas of cooperation included agriculture, education and culture, the environment, health, population, meteorology, prevention of drug abuse, rural development, science and technology, communications, tourism, transport and women in development, just to name a few. The activities associated with the SAARC include seminars, workshops, training courses, exchange of information and data for purposes of research, holding meetings for scientists, etc. The IPA, encompassing the 11 areas identified for cooperation is considered central to the whole SAARC process which include the following areas: agriculture,

communications, education-culture-sports, environment and meteorology, health and population activities, prevention of drug trafficking and drug abuse, rural development, science and technology, tourism, transport and women in development (Murthy, 1998a). From the 1990s onwards, numerous NGO's have also been actively involved in all these areas.

Important centres associated with the SAARC to carry out its aims include the SAARC Agricultural Information in Dhaka, the SAARC Tuberculosis Centre in Kathmandu, the SAARC Documentation Centre in New Delhi, the SAARC Meteorological centre in Dhaka, the Centre for Human Resource Development in Islamabad just to name a few. Thus, member states achieve national developmental goals through cooperation and collaboration and try to diffuse security tensions. In the early 1990s, at the Colombo Summit, the SAARC initiated deliberations on preferential trading agreements by establishing inter-governmental groups to suggest trade liberalization measures, as a result of which the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) was signed (Dutt and Bansal, 2012). The agreement stressed on the mutuality of advantages so as to benefit equitably all contracting states taking into account their respective level of economic development, recognition of the special needs of the least developed countries and the agreement on concrete preferential measures in their favour (Dutt and Bansal, 2012). The member states signed the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) at the 12th Summit in 2004 at Islamabad, by which there would be zero customs duty on trade of all products, by the end of 2016, on a phase by phase basis (Dutt and Bansal, 2012). It was agreed that by 2007, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka would reduce their duties to 20 per cent. In the subsequent five year phase ending in 2012, the 20 per cent duty would be further brought to zero in a series of annual cuts and that the lesser developed countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives would

be given an additional period of three years to reduce tariffs to zero (Dutt and Bansal, 2012). SAFTA is an instrument which encourages South Asian countries to operate at low costs of transaction, supported by the nearness of markets, the availability of infrastructure across the region, the presence of somewhat similar patterns of consumption and also the creation of a large market that would encourage investment both from within and outside the region. For the SAFTA to succeed, India and Pakistan must enjoy free trade, but trade relations have been constrained by ongoing political concerns and security issues (Pandian, 2002). Furthermore, major efforts need to be directed towards looking into the economic asymmetry of the member states. Pakistan has argued that full scale cooperation will not happen in an atmosphere of constant tension and conflict (Pandian, 2002). Pakistan also argues that it will further expand trade with India only when the Kashmir dispute has been resolved (Pandian, 2002).

The formation of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians which was launched in 1992 adds another important dimension to the process of regional cooperation (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). To take steps for regional integration, in the late 1980s, Pakistan initiated a visa exemption scheme, which came into force in the early 1990s. This scheme exempted members of national parliaments, heads of national academic institutions and their spouses/dependents from visa requirements. The aim of the SAARC is to select such areas of cooperation in which there would be mutual benefit for all, irrespective of levels of economic development of the member states and the existing economic disparities. SAARC has two sets of goals, which are very clearly defined, although these goals are also interrelated (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). The immediate goals of the SAARC are non-political in nature, which stress on national development through economic cooperation. The long-term goal is political in nature, which aims at the ultimate

creation of a durable, stable and peaceful regional order (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). This, however, is questionable in the light of Indo-Pak relations over the ongoing Kashmir dispute and the internal problems which all the countries are facing in the current climate.

2 Prospects and problems

A proposal, entitled 'SAARC, 2000: A Basic Needs Perspective', is an example of SAARC's eagerness in promoting national development activity through long-term action-oriented schemes, which in time are expected to provide substantial benefits to member states. The SAARC Regional Fund covered areas such as food, clothing, shelter, education, primary health care and population planning and environmental protection. Cooperation, however, amongst the member states has been slow. There have been fears amongst the smaller states of South Asia that unregulated regional activities in the areas of trade and finance would pave the way for their dependence on India's more developed economic infrastructure and finally such dependence will lead to political subservience. 'SAARC is an unorthodox attempt at solving an age old regional political problem' (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). This problem, as Gonslaves and Jetly argue, has two facets to it. Firstly, there is the problem of the preponderance of India in the South Asian region and secondly there is the reluctance of the other smaller South Asian nations to accept this preponderance (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). For instance, Pakistan, to make up for its comparative weakness, formed a system of alliances which it hoped would counter balance the dominance of India. The attempt was never particularly successful, since India and Pakistan have been to war now on four major occasions since partition in 1947. The creation of the SAARC should be seen as a new departure from conventional ways by which weaker powers have tried to counter a much stronger one. Instead of countering strength by a system

of alliances, other nations have tried to draw the stronger one into their arms, in order to disarm it and make its 'preponderant strength innocuous' (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). Thus, the smaller countries of southern Asia, hope through the SAARC to be able to forestall the use of that superior power (India) for hostile purposes especially with regard to the creation of a new coercive order on the subcontinent. 'By trying to create a functional unity within a limited sphere of action, and expecting that the operation of that unity within a limited sphere of action will lead to a community of interests within that particular sphere which will then spread to other functional fields say agriculture, communications, poverty alleviation, and it is hoped that political cooperation would grow organically' (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). The success of this depends on the internal distribution of power within and amongst the different countries/committees of the SAARC, and between them and member governments, and secondly it depends on the unity or degree of unity which exists amongst the member states in economic, political and security fields. So one would need to look at, who are the technical committees actually composed of, and will they follow an independent course of action on the basis of technical convictions regarding the best choice of techniques or will they act merely as government representatives of their states? One also needs to look at the relationship between the hoped for community of interests in the agreed areas of cooperation, and the actual economic, political and security interests of the individual member states.

For the creation of a successful regional body, conflicts in the region or more correctly, the ongoing conflicts in the region need to be looked into and addressed so that the interests uniting member states may outweigh those separating them. The question that needs to be asked is, will regionalism overcome nationalism or the nationalisms of the member states of the South Asian region? The SAARC was created predominantly as an economic organi-

zation rather than a body that would look into the key security concerns. The SAARC was not a formal security alliance or bloc. Not being a formal security alliance or bloc, the association has neither solved nor has it attempted to solve any of the key contentious security issues that have plagued the region, which has retarded regional integration to a large extent. However, to some extent, the SAARC has emerged as a confidence building measure in South Asia. It also acts as a platform for meetings for discussion, particularly in a friendly environment, where they are free from the rigidities of governmental policy. A significant contribution of SAARC with regards to regional security is the regional convention on the suppression of terrorism, which was signed at the Kathmandu Summit in the year, 1987 (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999).

It has been argued that to some extent, the SAARC is a response to the globalism that is being increasingly dominated by the G7. It is also a response to the growing regionalism around the world. It should also be seen as a response to the felt regional needs. Given the political realities, especially Indo-Pak relations and the other conflicts that divide Indian society, SAARC can only be a cooperation promoting device in feasible areas. Since India is the 'core state', it should be seen as an asset for the success of the SAARC and also a country that can be counted on for regional cooperation. The region has been further divided, not just because of the intra-regional differences/disputes, but also because of the divergences in pursuit of national policies, conflicting responses to the political challenges/changes and also because of the so called incongruous economic interests. South Asian analyst, Dr Sruti Patnaik, has spoken about 'regional cooperation without regional commitment', with regards to the SAARC (Patnaik, 2010). In the 1990s, however, the SAARC had gathered some momentum, as Professor Ananya Mukherjee Reed mentions in her work, which is mainly due to globalization and the economic liberalization within

many of the SAARC countries (Mukherjee-Reed, 1997).

Amongst all the 'regions' of the world, South Asia has been quite late in coming to terms with the idea of regionalism and accepting/embracing the idea of regionalism and a regional organization. It was even termed, a region without regionalism. This to a large extent is because societies in the subcontinent are very much divided. Apart from the caste system and other social stratifications which exist in India, there are sectarian, racial, linguistic and ethnic differences which exist in the Afghanistan–Pakistan (AF-PAK) region. There are a whole range of conflicts going on in the region (Mukherjee, 2013). In addition to the intra state conflicts, there are a whole range of interstate conflicts that have gone on in the region, some of which still have not been resolved. In this connection, mention may be made of the Indo-Pak dispute, the Indo-Bangladesh dispute, the Bangladesh–Pakistan dispute, the Indo-Sri Lankan dispute and the Indo-Nepali dispute, just to name a few (Haider, 2001).

Afghanistan had been kept out of South Asia for a long time because it was debated: should this country be allowed in, since it had for centuries been the gateway for invaders to attack India or South Asia proper, although to some extent it had also functioned as a bulwark against Russian aggrandizement? The new conflicts were considered to arise from various sources, some of which included the involvement in one another's domestic conflict, the uncontrolled transfer of arms to the region from external suppliers and the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan. The Kashmir issue has most certainly strained the relations between the two major countries of the subcontinent, India and Pakistan. Due to Indo-Pak antagonism, South Asia, will remain locked in an unstable situation of 'neither war/nor peace' (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). Many of the contemporary conflicts in South Asia actually have historical roots during pre-colonial and colonial times.

Colonialism, especially the policy of divide and rule, has most certainly played its part in stirring up tension. Then there have also been ongoing border disputes, ethnic cross-border movements and problems over distribution of river waters. Because of the Indo-centric nature of the region, without India being more accommodating towards its neighbours, cooperation initiatives will indeed be very slow. India may regard accommodation unnecessary, since it is quite powerful as an actor and world player, and this uncompromising attitude will only exacerbate the already strained situation. Despite the differences, South Asia has a lot in common culturally, although the history of international relations in the region, post 1947 has been marked by more conflict than cooperation. India's centrality in the region, its vast size, the fact that it inherited British India's central state apparatus, its huge population, its resources and its economic and military power compared with its neighbours have problematized relations between the South Asian states. There has been a feeling that because of India's dominance, any element of cooperation will in real terms actually favour India and work against the interests of the smaller nations. However, regional integration will also allow the smaller countries to access the markets of India, which are much larger than their own domestic markets. India's smaller South Asian neighbours fear India's hegemony in the region. India also does not want any powerful external actor to play a role in the region. This is of course quite similar to the situation in East Asia, where China has a similar hegemonic role. The smaller countries obviously view this with considerable suspicion. This has also led to a very strange situation. Whilst India does not want any powerful or major external actor involved in the region and wants the smaller group of nations to cooperate politically in order to safeguard the region's autonomy vis a vis major external powers, most of India's neighbours are constantly on the look out to forge linkages with those very external powers in order to keep India under check

and safeguard their own autonomy against the possible expansionist policies followed by India. The smaller countries fear that India might take up a policy of aggrandizement and territorial expansion. India is not apprehensive of any South Asian power singly, but when it collaborates with an external power, it may jeopardize India's security.

'Political distrust and disputes have been the major obstacles to regionalism in South Asia' (Dutta, 2011). Indo-Pak relations are at the centre of this mistrust and suspicion (Patnaik, 2004). Although for India, Pakistan is enemy number one, India also has to deal with a threat from outside South Asia, China, and 'has to deal with China at many levels' (Sikri, 2009). This external threat which India has had to deal with has pushed it away from focusing on regional development. Divergences in the political systems of South Asian countries are another cause for disharmony. India is the world's largest democracy, based on the British model. All the other countries have struggled with democracy in a major way. Most countries in the subcontinent have weak governments (Dash, 1997). Secularism in India or multiculturalism in India and the lack of it in neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan has only added fuel to the fire. When communal riots break out in India and when there is Hindu-Muslim tension, Pakistan, being an Islamic state, feels the need to intervene and show sympathy to Indian Muslims because of the concept of the 'ummah' or world-wide Muslim community as a result of its collective sense of Islamic identity. This is obviously not viewed favourably by India, who sees Pakistan interfering in its domestic problems. India refuses to recognize Pakistan's political system, since Islam is the state religion and therefore others like Hindu's, which is India's religious majority group, are treated as second class citizens. Similarly, Pakistan sees Indian secularism as a sham and a cover for Hindu domination. Furthermore, Pakistan uses anti-Indian-ism to establish its own identity in South Asia. Although India has stressed on

the common culture, which all South Asian nations share, the smaller nations are more interested in protecting their own individual cultural identity. In other words, for the smaller nations, too much stress on cultural commonality may create a hindrance to the preservation and growth of their separate identities which are so important to them. There is a feeling in Pakistan that unfettered cultural exchange with India, will lead to their own culture being swamped and diluted if there is a constant flow of Indian cultural goods and products into Pakistan.

With the emergence of Buddhism as a political force, a feeling of cultural separateness from a predominantly Hindu India, is being cultivated in certain sections of the political elite in Sri Lanka. Even in Nepal, where there is a Hindu majority, the elite there take pride in their own culture and own versions of Hinduism and do not want to be constantly reminded that they and India belong to the same cultural strain. There is a fear amongst Nepalese people that they might lose what they perceive as their distinct identity and be treated as a mere extension of Indian people (Gonslaves and Jetly, 1999). Ever since the SAARC was created, the smaller member countries of South Asia have looked at it as a platform from where their distinct identity and interests would be adequately reflected (Murthy, 1998b). For regional integration to be successful, the SAARC would need to develop a framework in which both the big and small nations of South Asia can work together. It has often been argued that a 'SAARC Parliament could go beyond the bureaucratic-technical parameters of the existing organisation and promote new political, moral and cultural dimensions of regionalism in South Asia' (Paranjpe, 2002). Finally, one could also talk about the problems associated with globalization and the impact of globalization on the region, and how globalization has undermined regionalism in South Asia. For instance, although globalization has benefitted some groups, many

others have been excluded from economic benefits, feeling marginalized. According to the Asian Development Bank, although India has to a large extent lifted millions from poverty, income disparities and regional imbalances still persist.² Some of the adverse impacts of globalization especially the economic impact on South Asia has pushed governments away from regionalism, and instead, they are having to focus more on immediate economic problems at the domestic level.

II Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it could thus be argued that not only has regionalism failed to act as a positive force in the subcontinent in the past and even today, but also the prospects for it to become a robust force in future are also quite bleak. South Asia continues to be plagued with ongoing disputes amongst nations, and the countries of the SAARC are grappling with conflicts within their own national territorial boundaries. The conflict which has dominated the South Asian region has been the Indo-Pak conflict over the Kashmir issue, which is the major interstate conflict, but there are also a whole range of, and plethora of domestic conflicts in southern Asia. The violent secessionist movements in the Indian north-eastern states and the Maoist insurgency in central India have most certainly exacerbated the already difficult situation, and undermined regionalism. In addition, there has been the rise of or strengthening of Islamist terrorism in the region (Mukherjee, 2010a). The Global War on Terror has also added to the conflict. Since the American intervention/bombing in the AF-PAK region in 2001, Afghans have fled from their own country to neighbouring Pakistan and this has given rise to a new set of ethnic conflicts between the new arrivals from Afghanistan and the local residents of Pakistan. Pakistan, since its creation in 1947, has struggled with internal problems like secessionist movements in Sindh, Baluchistan and

the North West Frontier Provinces, which has diverted its attention from the regional/South Asia level, to its domestic level. The lack of democracy in Pakistan (Mukherjee, 2010b) and the problems of state building in Afghanistan have collectively problematized the situation and undermined regionalism in southern Asia. A more democratic political system in the countries of southern Asia would have most certainly helped with regionalism, since there would have been more transparency and therefore more confidence building measures. Currently most South Asian countries are struggling with democracy. Furthermore, the prolonged presence of the military in Pakistan and the role played by Islamists in the region has also played its part in undermining South Asian regionalism. Other problems which almost all the countries of the South Asian region are struggling with today include economic under development, unemployment, inequalities as a result of globalization, chronic hunger and malnutrition, human rights abuses, disease and squalor, population explosion, environmental disasters, just to name a few. Problems associated with chronic hunger, disease and malnutrition fall in the category of human security, which refers to people's security and security of the individual on a day-to-day basis. For people in southern Asia, just surviving each day without the basic necessities of life can become a major battle. Since these problems have been ongoing for the past few decades and deserve urgent attention, the governments of these countries have not been able to develop regionalism as an effective force. Thus, in the final analysis, it is the lack of a security community in South Asia, which has hindered the progress of the SAARC. The situation with regards to South Asian regionalism has been beautifully captured by Lawrence Saez, 'South Asia forms a unique regional security complex that enables certain forms of regional cooperation and bars cooperation on other issue areas' (Saez, 2011).

Notes

1. www.saarc-sec.org/SAARC-Charter (last accessed on 17 March 2013).
2. www.adb.org/countries/India (Last accessed on 17 March 2013).

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