

SAARC's Promise: Prosperity or Continued Insecurity?

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A regional approach to development in South Asia began with the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in December 1985. A decade and half later, however, South Asia still confronts the same problems of poverty and development. Despite the significant transformations taking place in the world, mutual fear, distrust and conflict in the region have yet to lessen. Something is wrong with the regional cooperation mechanism. This article identifies the fundamental problems besetting South Asia and examines the major defects in the institutional mechanism that addresses them. It then recommends a new policy approach to reinvigorate SAARC, thus enabling it to contribute to regional peace and development.

From a regional perspective, South Asia¹ presents a unique challenge. South Asia is heir to a profound common civilizational continuum that constitutes a historical basis for sustaining harmonious relations among the people of the region.² At the same time, this region, with a rich and complex plurality of cultural and religious traditions, is also characterized by divergences and interstate conflicts. South Asia is also heterogeneous. The region is composed of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian populations. The geographical forms of the nations also vary: Nepal and Bhutan are land-locked whereas Sri Lanka and the Maldives are composed of islands. The remarkable difference in size and population between India and the other countries of South Asia characterizes the composition of this region. The central position of India, which alone has a land border with or direct access by sea to all the other countries of the region, is another significant geopolitical characteristic.³

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With the exception of Nepal and Bhutan, all countries were part of the British Empire. Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 and the Maldives, formerly a Protectorate of Britain, was given full independence in 1971. India gained independence from British rule in 1947. The country was partitioned into Hindu-dominant India and Muslim-dominant Pakistan when the British gave up control. The issue of Kashmir, unresolved since their independence, continues to remain a thorny issue between the two countries.

Against this historical and geopolitical background, regional cooperation in South Asia was initiated through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The regional institution aims at promoting cooperation without touching the points of contention among its members. After more than 15 years of existence, SAARC's attempts at cooperation have had a negligible impact on regional development. This article identifies the fundamental problems that beset South Asia and impede the progress of regional cooperation. Bilateral differences, particularly that of Indo-Pakistan, and divergent security perceptions are identified as the major problems affecting regional development and peace in South Asia. The major weakness of SAARC seems to be its disregard for these regional problems. If the past is a guide, significant progress in the areas of cooperation identified under SAARC will not be made without addressing the issues that divide the region. It is, therefore, high time to reinvigorate SAARC, enabling it to resolve the underlying problems of the region and promote regional peace and development. While recognizing the modest achievements of SAARC in such a complex environment, this paper proposes measures to address the fundamental problems restraining regional cooperation endeavors. The policy measures examined in this paper include discussion of bilateral and contentious issues, institutionalization of confidence-building measures, creation of the SAARC Regional Forum and strengthening of the SAARC Secretariat. The policy measures proposed in the article seek to reform the existing regional organization and enable it to contribute to regional harmony, which alone seems to be the key to the progress and prosperity in South Asia.

Quest for cooperation

The quest for regional cooperation in South Asia formally began with a proposal by Bangladesh in 1980 to explore the possibility of establishing an institutional arrangement for regional cooperation.⁴ In the beginning, the response to the idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was not very encouraging. India feared such an institution might have an anti-Indian posture. At the same time, other countries were apprehensive of Indian dominance. However, they all seemed to agree, "The prospect without cooperation is growing instability, violence and even wars."⁵ Thus, when SAARC was formed in December 1985, it was considered to be a major diplomatic breakthrough in South Asia. The formation of SAARC symbolized the beginning of a new approach to cooperation in the region.

The formation of SAARC was also a reaction to the South Asian countries' desire for mutual cooperation to attain economic prosperity, on the one hand, and the growing trend of regionalization and success stories of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the other.

South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation

The philosophy behind SAARC is to foster economic cooperation despite the differences in the region. Therefore, it focuses mainly on socioeconomic development. Promotion of mutual trust and understanding as well as collaboration in cultural and technical fields constitute other priorities of SAARC. Pervaiz Cheema has observed:

Unlike North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Warsaw Pact, South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which were products of a desire for collective efforts against perceived threats, SAARC was born as a collective response to a desire for a regional organization that could facilitate cooperation and promote economic interaction among the regional countries.⁶

Given the prevailing discord in the region it was natural for this organization to avoid political and security issues. Regarding its formation, it is interesting to note that unlike many regional organizations, the formation of SAARC was not the result of the initiatives taken by the leading countries in the region. Rather, SAARC came into being through the concerted efforts of smaller countries and without any involvement of outsiders.⁷

The organizational structure of SAARC consists of the Summit, the Council of Ministers, the Standing Committee, the Programming Committee, the Technical Committee and the Action Committee.⁸ This structure requires regular meetings of the heads of state of governments, foreign ministers, foreign secretaries, and senior officials of foreign ministries, as well other government officials directly responsible for the implementation, coordination and monitoring of the programs agreed upon.

Achievements of SAARC

SAARC marked its 15-year Anniversary on 8 of December 2000. During this time, it has identified many areas for cooperation. These include agriculture; communication; education; culture and sports; environment and meteorology; health, population activities, and child welfare; prevention of drug trafficking; rural development; science and technology; tourism; transport; and women in development. Moreover, the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) came into operation in 1995. SAPTA envisions the gradual reduction and eventual elimination

of tariffs within SAARC and is a significant achievement of the regional organization. SAARC is also committed to attaining a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 2005.

SAARC has created many exchange programs to promote people-to-people contact in the region. These include the Audio Visual Exchange Program; Scheme for Promotion of Organized Tourism; Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships Scheme; Youth Volunteers Program; Visa Exemption Scheme; and Youth Awards Scheme.⁹ Similarly, associations at various levels from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to parliamentarians, to the Chamber of Commerce and Industries have been formed. Much of this work has been undertaken in the field of poverty eradication. SAARC has also held regional conventions on the suppression of terrorism, on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, and on an agreement establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve.

The number of activities undertaken within the framework of SAARC indicates its expanding scope, but its actual achievements are quite modest. In fact, the pace of development and progress made by SAARC has been remarkably slow. Despite the expectation that successful cooperative beginnings in different areas will influence the member countries to move forward with deeper commitment toward attaining substantial gains, SAARC has failed to make such progress.¹⁰

Problems

The identification of different areas of cooperation under SAARC reflects the capacity of its members to develop a common course of action. Occasional disruptions in the SAARC activities have, however, adversely affected the tempo of the process and progress. Member countries' lack of commitment and vigor in implementing the programs constitutes a serious problem. Various internal as well as bilateral factors have caused the delay and postponement of the annual summits. The 11th Summit, previously scheduled to be held in 1999 in Nepal, remains postponed as of this writing, due to Indian concern over the military regime now in place in Pakistan. The SAARC spirit in a true sense has not developed. Though SAARC was conceived along lines similar to ASEAN and EU, the SAARC countries have been unable to forge the bonds that characterize these regional institutions.¹¹ SAARC also has failed to reduce the mistrust among its members. After a period of more than 15 years, South Asia is still plagued by poverty and disharmony. The major factors impeding the progress of SAARC consist of bilateral differences, divergent security perceptions, and the Indo-Pakistan conflict.

Bilateral differences

Most of the countries within the region have important bilateral issues that need to be resolved; most of these issues concern India. The leaders and observers in the region expected that increased cooperation within SAARC would help attain

the twin goals of economic development and the easing of tensions. Unfortunately, SAARC has not facilitated the easing of bilateral tensions. In fact, in the period following its establishment, bilateral tensions have spread in an unprecedented manner. India and Pakistan came close to war in 1987 and 1990, and fought again in Kargil in 1999.¹²

In addition to the Indo-Pakistan conflict, which is examined under a separate heading below, the region faces many bilateral differences such as the Indo-Bangladesh problems over water sharing issues; movement of people and territorial issues; and the Indo-Nepal problems of transit-related issues, territorial issues, security concerns, and disagreement over hydropower projects. In fact, Indo-Nepal relations reached their worst point over trade and transit issues in 1989—four years after the SAARC was formed. Similarly, Indo-Sri Lankan differences have resulted from the “covert and overt support to Sri Lankan Tamils by both the Central and State (Tamil Nadu) governments of India.”¹³ These relations did not improve after SAARC came into existence. All countries in South Asia have been confronting internal problems, which, in many instances, have spillover effects in bilateral relations. Bangladesh confronted an insurgency of the Chakmas who have sought to operate from Indian territory, thereby, complicating relations with India.¹⁴ Bhutan adopted an oppressive policy toward its citizens of Nepalese origin and forcibly evicted them from the country. Approximately 100,000 Bhutanese refugees are currently sheltered in Nepal.¹⁵ The long-standing issues concerning repatriation of these refugees to Bhutan has affected the relations between the two countries.

The bilateral problems mentioned above have prevented the South Asian countries from developing a common spirit and bond. Other examples of regionalization indicate that the key to success lies in a ‘we-feeling’ among the members, a feeling that is lacking in SAARC. Bilateral suspicion and conflicts between the states have affected the successful functioning of the regional organization. Unless these factors are adequately addressed, the SAARC process is unlikely to gain the desired momentum. Even after a reasonable period of time, the organizational framework devised in South Asia could not contribute toward easing the differences and enhancing the feeling of security in the region. In light of the history of relations within the region, which has been marked more by conflict than cooperation, the slow pace of progress made in regional cooperation in South Asia can be largely attributed to political reasons.¹⁶

Divergent Security perceptions

Unlike ASEAN, “which was a product of a shared threat perception of communist insurgency,”¹⁷ and EEC, which initially feared the Soviet threat, SAARC did not come into existence due to a common threat experienced by the members. To the contrary, South Asia remains largely divided over security perceptions. Bimal Prasad has observed:

While India wants all the South Asian countries to cooperate in the political field in order to safeguard the region's autonomy and security vis-à-vis major external powers, most of India's neighbors are constantly on the lookout to forge political and other linkages with those very external powers in order to counterbalance India and safeguard their own autonomy and security against possible encroachment by India and this makes India apprehensive about the designs of its neighbors.¹⁸

The divergent security perceptions indicated above can be significantly attributed to the lack of enthusiasm in developing a distinct South Asian identity.

According to Kanti Bajpai, "India has been seen as the principal interstate threat to smaller countries."¹⁹ Countries in the region fear India due both to bilateral issues and the potential for Indian dominance. What would otherwise be simply a bilateral issue, quite normal between neighbors, is also complicated by the perception of Indian hegemonic design. The persistence of this conflict of perception has largely stalled the mutual cooperation campaign initiated in the region. Since its independence from Britain, India has viewed the involvement of extra-regional powers in the region as a threat to its security. India's sensitivity to the involvement of outside powers in the region is more psychological than objective. The impact of this sensitivity is also evident in other Indian policies involving interaction with foreigners. India is still suspicious of foreign investment, multinationals, and a globalized economic order due to its colonial history when invaders came posing as traders.²⁰ During the Cold War, U.S. and USSR involvement in South Asia varied from time to time depending on their broader global commitments and strategic interest.²¹ Presently China, more than any other country, has emerged as the actor favored by the smaller South Asian nations, in their bids to increase their maneuvering capacity.²² India and other South Asian countries also differ in their perceptions of China. India is the only country in South Asia that perceives China as a threat. India perceives a threat for a variety of reasons, including its border dispute with China, the "latter's involvement with domestic uprisings and secessionist groups,"²³ and Chinese cooperation with Pakistan in nuclear and missiles programs. The other SAARC members face no such problem with China. This difference in perception occasionally affects the bilateral relations between India and other South Asian countries.

Indo-Pakistan Conflict

In light of the nuclearization of India and Pakistan and the greater animosity between them, the Indo-Pakistan conflict needs to be analyzed separately from other bilateral conflicts in the region. India and Pakistan have been bitterly divided over the issue of Kashmir since their split in 1947. The dispute began after the Hindu ruler of the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir decided to join India at the time of

partition. Pakistan's refusal to accept this led to major wars in 1948 and 1965. They also fought in 1971 over the fate of East Pakistan, which broke away to form Bangladesh. War nearly broke out between India and Pakistan in 1987 (due to provocative maneuvers along the border by both sides) and in 1990 (due to Pakistani activities in Indian-administered Kashmir).²⁴ Both countries tested nuclear weapons in 1998 and still remain beyond the ambit of the two major multilateral arms control regimes, the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.²⁵ The crisis precipitated again along the Line of Control in Kashmir in May-July 1999.

Nuclearization and the arms build up in South Asia can be partly attributed to the role and position of China. The growing strength of China left India insecure without a nuclear deterrent. Particularly since the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962, Indian defense planners have worried about the growth of Chinese conventional and nuclear capabilities.²⁶ It is worth recalling here that after Taiwan, India has the most significant border/territorial disputes with the People's Republic of China.²⁷

Pakistan shares a border of some 2,250 kilometers with India and also shares about 640 kilometers of borders with China.²⁸ In the early 1960s, Pakistan served as a useful link between China and the rest of the world at a time when the United States attempted to isolate China.²⁹ Although this helped China ease the hardships of isolation and gave Pakistan a counterweight against India and Russia, it also deepened Indian mistrust.³⁰ Pakistan's security perceptions have also been shaped by its relationship with Afghanistan, which has claims on Pakistani territory, and both clashed over border issues in the 1950s and the 1960s.³¹ Pakistan's strengthening of extra-regional and Muslim-world ties, expanded relations with China (ensuring the supply of weapons and military hardware, establishment of defense-related industry, and cooperation in the nuclear and missile programs), joining of the U.S.-sponsored security arrangements of the 1950s, etc. can be understood in this context.³² These measures have largely contributed towards enhancing the strength and deterrence capacity of Pakistan.

Neither India nor Pakistan shows signs of curbing their arms race and build-up. The sporadic fighting over Kashmir continues. However, the "emergence of insurgent groups in Kashmir since 1989"³³ and the development of nuclear weapons in both countries have added new dimensions to this long-standing problem, making the Indo-Pakistan border a volatile region. According to Tellis, "several observers in the US and abroad, including successive Directors of Central Intelligence, have argued that the South Asian region represents the most probable international arena where deterrence breakdown might lead to nuclear use."³⁴

Persistence of Indo-Pakistan rivalry indicates not only the failure of SAARC to promote mutual understanding and trust by focusing on regional socioeconomic cooperation, but also the difficulty for SAARC to make progress without resolving this conflict.

Proposed Solution

Contentious bilateral issues and the spillover of internal conflicts on bilateral relations have continuously inhibited faster and more substantial progress in SAARC.³⁵ For 15 years, SAARC has been unable to advance mutual trust or lessen tensions among its members. Without addressing these issues effectively, SAARC is not likely to contribute toward the prosperity in the region, as their commitment remains significantly hindered by the sense of regional uncertainty. Resolution of these issues will give each member a new sense of purpose, optimism, and confidence in their mutually developed programs, making the member countries show more commitment and vigor in the implementation of the regional programs. The following is a list of possible reforms SAARC could undertake in order to be more effective and relevant to the resolution of problems in South Asia.

Inclusion of bilateral and contentious issues

Most of the troubles within South Asia fall within the ambit of bilateral relationships.³⁶ South Asian countries should, therefore, discuss their bilateral disputes and contentious issues in the SAARC forum. This institutional approach will reduce the fear of cheating among the member countries and will have significant impact on other regional cooperative endeavors. The discussion of such issues will enhance understanding at a regional level and will facilitate the adoption of necessary confidence-building measures. The Charter of the SAARC, with a general provision, bars discussion of “bilateral and contentious issues” in the SAARC forum. The member countries should, therefore, consider amending the Charter to incorporate a provision to allow discussion of such matters. SAARC, however, should continue to adhere to taking decisions by unanimity.

The most difficult issues should be deferred until easier ones are settled. The resolution of some issues may enhance confidence in the institution and therefore make it easier to deal with the more complicated issues. Movements of criminals across borders, use of one country’s territory for subversive activities in another, state-sponsored propaganda against other countries, etc. are some issues that could be addressed from the outset. Issues concerning sharing of resources, benefits and liabilities could then be discussed. As they are the most problematic, territorial issues are best discussed at a later stage. The Secretary General should have the prerogative to choose the issue with consideration of its complexities and the mood of the countries concerned.

Inclusion of political and security issues

The SAARC forum has been used to assess international economic, political, and security matters. SAARC should also be used to examine and review political and regional security issues in South Asia. Member states should be expected to elaborate their foreign policies and positions on nuclear issues and armaments. Sharing

of such policy issues would help develop a regional spirit in the South Asian countries. Such a practice would also facilitate possible future formulations of unified positions on issues.

Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)

The formation of SAARC itself can be taken as the most important confidence-building measure in South Asia.³⁷ SAARC provides a venue for the leaders of the region to assemble on a regular basis. Nevertheless, bilateral differences and conflict of perception still persist among SAARC countries. SAARC has not become a forum to narrow down such differences among members. What is proposed here is that the member countries should mandate SAARC to adopt Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in consideration of the situation in the region. An institutional approach toward building confidence appears to be an appropriate step in the South Asian context.

SAARC should serve as a permanent institutional mechanism to oversee CBMs. Because both India and Pakistan are armed with nuclear weapons, the threat of intentional, accidental or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons has increased, and conflict prevention and promoting CBMs has become an urgent need.³⁸ Communication, constraint, transparency, and verification measures are the primary military CBM “tools.”³⁹ Most of the CBMs adopted between the two countries so far consist of military rather than non-military CBMs.⁴⁰ The major CBM accords between India and Pakistan include the military hotlines (1971, 1990), the hotline between Prime Ministers (1989, 1990), the Declaration of Non-Use of Force (1966), the arrangement for prior notification of military exercises (1991), for the non-intrusion of air space (1991), for the non-attack of nuclear facilities (1988), for the prohibition of chemical weapons (1992), etc.⁴¹ The SAARC should be instrumental in maintaining non-military CBMs in the region. If “economic CBMs (promotion of trade, joint ventures, contacts between Chambers of Trade and Commerce)”⁴² are expected to lessen the tension by increasing interaction and interdependence, sociocultural CBMs would be the most significant in that they could address the root causes of the conflict between India and Pakistan.

The SAARC nations should focus on eliminating, in the long run, their negative perceptions of each other. Mutahir Ahmed has appropriately said, “The success of CBMs depends upon ending the ‘enemy myth,’ which continues to perpetuate a highly negative image of each country in the other, as well as the support of the Indian and Pakistani people themselves.”⁴³ For this purpose, SAARC measures may include commitments from both sides to refrain from making adverse use of propaganda and reference to religion. Interactions between religious organizations should be encouraged in order to reduce religious intolerance. SAARC may encourage joint action and cooperation in humanitarian and cultural matters at the regional level. The formation of joint sports teams at the bilateral or regional level

could also be encouraged to compete with similar teams from other region or sub-regions. Similarly, SAARC may encourage efforts to develop joint positions on international issues of common interest. In addition to the ongoing process of removing barriers to trade and commerce, the establishment of Indo-Pakistan joint ventures in different economically viable sectors may be encouraged.

Creation of the SAARC Regional Forum (SRF)

The rationale behind the widening of the SAARC in the form of the SRF is three-fold. First, interaction with key actors in the South Asia's own forum would be instrumental in promoting peace and stability in the region. Second, such a forum would also provide India and Pakistan with opportunities for further economic cooperation in a context larger than South Asian. Third, the forum thus widened will also address the smaller countries' concerns about and fear of Indian domination by giving them the sense of belonging to a larger group. The SRF aims at expanding mutual cooperation with other extra-regional members and reducing the tension in the region caused by Indo-Pakistan misunderstanding.

The SRF proposed here does not deal exclusively with the security issues but would have two segments: economic and security. In the economic segment, the SRF would act to promote cooperation between SAARC and other extra-regional members, particularly China. In the security segment, the SRF would aim to eliminate the security dilemma faced by India and Pakistan, promote confidence-building measures, and ensure nuclear safety in the region. The extra-regional members in the SRF would be expected to persuade both India and Pakistan to revive the CBM process in view of the growing risk of nuclear dangers and to resolve the Kashmir dispute. The SRF could be used for a comprehensive discussion of arms and nuclear weapons issues. The CBMs to be discussed in the SRF will mostly include military CBMs. SRF may be a forum to discuss and develop new nuclear risk reductions and safety measures as well. The SRF will not discuss security matters beyond the 'SAARC plus China' region but will discuss economic matters between SAARC and any other extra-regional member of SRF. For extra-regional members, the SRF may also serve as a venue to explore and exploit the combined 'SAARC plus China' market composed of more than 2.5 billion people.

China shares a border with four out of the seven SAARC members, and has always been an important country to the region. Only India has significant differences with China, as Chinese military cooperation with Pakistan has a negative impact on India. Given its geopolitical situation and evolving strength, SAARC-China cooperation in economic as well as security matters would be a significant factor in the promotion of regional peace and development. The SRF should, therefore, include China as well as other extra-regional powers like the United States, Japan, other interested nuclear powers, and advanced countries. Japan has shown interest in lessening the tension between India and Pakistan and, as a principal

financial donor, is also in a position to play a significant role in the development of the region. As the United States has been concerned about the nuclear development in South Asia and has been trying to diffuse tension between India and Pakistan, its involvement is also desirable. Similarly, a stable Afghanistan may be considered as a future member in the SAARC regional forum.

The SRF will meet annually at the foreign ministerial level just before the SAARC Summit Meeting. A Senior Officials Meeting (representing foreign ministries) will precede the ministerial meeting. The Senior Officials Meeting will set the agenda for the SRF meeting. The modality for the follow-up and monitoring will be agreed upon during the Senior Officials Meeting. In consideration of the inadequate resources and expertise, the Secretary General will not play a significant role in the security segment. However, he will play a very active role in the economic segment of the SRF. He will mobilize external resources, prepare regional projects for the consideration of economic segment of the SRF, coordinate regional policies to promote joint ventures, and recommend measures and guidelines to the member countries for promoting regional relations with extra-regional members.

Strengthening the Secretariat

The SAARC Secretariat, based in Kathmandu, has been operational since January 1987. Each member country, in an alphabetical order of rotation, appoints the Secretary General, who has a fixed tenure of two years. Seven directors from the seven member states, deputed for a fixed term, assist the Secretary. Only the General Services Staff is permanent. In the current institutional structure of SAARC, the Secretary General is not in a position to assume an active role to initiate and pursue matters in absence of a specific mandate.⁴⁴ The lack of adequate authority and absence of a permanent staff of its own would seriously hamper the functioning of the secretariat in the new context. In fact, the inclusion of regional political/security issues as well as bilateral and contentious issues in the deliberations at SAARC forums necessitates an efficient and dynamic SAARC. The Secretary General should, therefore, be given adequate authority and autonomy to take initiatives as well as to enhance the effectiveness and dynamism of the SAARC.

The role of the Secretary General can be enhanced by the authorization to initiate SAARC activities, and set agendas and priority for the discussion of contentious issues. The Secretary's functions may include encouraging and proposing member countries to prepare common position paper on international issues. Empowering the Secretary to initiate and advise non-military CBMs for the member countries and observe and follow up on their compliance as agreed upon would contribute to the promotion of mutual understanding in the region. Recognition of the Secretary General as a spokesperson and representative of SAARC will also enhance the leader's profile. Authorization to mobilize external resources to undertake SAARC activities would enhance the position's independence and impartiality. The current role of the

Secretary General is limited by a short tenure of two years and the lack of a permanent professional staff. Extending this tenure to four years and according the position a ministerial status (instead of the current ambassadorial rank) with its own permanent staff would enhance the Secretary's role, influence, and acceptability in dealing with the bilateral differences between the member states and initiating CBMs.

Justification for the new proposal

In the course of its short history, SAARC has been able to identify various areas of common interest in South Asia. It has also acquired experience in developing plans of actions and programs, particularly in the areas of social and economic development. SAARC is, therefore, well placed to promote regional cooperation in any field in South Asia. Technically, it has established the mechanism and gained expertise in dealing with regional issues. Politically, it has gained acceptance and recognition as a viable institution in operation in South Asia. An agreement on the new structure and scope of SAARC would reflect a renewed and stronger political commitment of the member states and would provide further impetus to the ongoing activities in the socioeconomic field. Similarly, its focus on the amicable resolution of longstanding bilateral disputes would mark a new beginning in the history of South Asia. The involvement of SAARC in confidence building measures would ensure continuity and effectiveness of these measures in the promotion of peace and stability in the region.

The changes proposed here aim at addressing the problems in South Asia from three different perspectives. Firstly, the security segment of the SRF represents an international approach and tries to deal with the security concerns of both India and Pakistan to encourage each to curb its arms buildup and nuclear programs. Bilateral and regional approaches would not be effective toward this end in light of the complex and technical nature of the problem. Secondly, the focus on non-military CBMs under SAARC aims at eliminating member nations' negative perceptions of each other without requiring any involvement of extra-regional powers. Finally, the economic segment of the SRF is expected to give a further impetus to the regional economic cooperation and development in the region. The renewed commitment of the member countries will have positive impact on the cooperative efforts and their belief in regional institutions.

The proposal to include China is also important. While India perceives China as an external threat, Pakistan receives weapons from and cooperates with China. Interaction with China is likely to narrow the existing gap between India and other South Asian countries' perceptions of China. The current efforts of the United States to "encourage India and Pakistan to continue official dialogue along with other measures such as test ban, fissile material cutoff, strategic restraint and export controls"⁴⁵ are not likely to effectively solve the South Asian problem as they do not pay attention to the role of China in the current state of South Asia and to the need

for greater economic interaction, as well as other non-military CBMs.

In summary, this proposal is a comprehensive mechanism aimed at addressing not only the different aspects of the Indo-Pakistan conflict, but also the peace, cooperation, and development of the whole South Asia region. Its focus on enhancing regional cooperation, mitigating bilateral differences, promoting CBMs, and addressing security concerns at the same time under a single regional institution is what South Asia truly needs.

Feasibility

The proposed reforms in SAARC consist of three fundamental changes: inclusion of bilateral and contentious issues in the SAARC agenda, creation of the SRF, and empowering and granting some autonomy to the Secretary General of SAARC. The first reform is likely to be supported by all countries except India. Since all the bilateral problems concern it, India is likely to consider the proposed reform as an offensive move by the rest of the SAARC members. This position of India was evident during the formation of SAARC. However, a great deal of Indian concern about SAARC opening to other regional organizations and powerful extra-regional actors has been eliminated in the context of the post-Cold War imperatives.⁴⁶ During the Cold War period, India was wary of strategic shifts in the policies of the USSR, the United States, and China. India was greatly concerned about the attention the United States gave to Pakistan in the 1980s, which was strategic in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet withdrawal marked a distinct shift in United States policy toward Pakistan to the satisfaction of India. India has consistently been able to receive U.S. attention in the post-Cold War period, making India more assured and confident. Furthermore, Indian ambition to assume a greater role in international politics would be furthered by a matured, amicable and friendly role in the region.

For the other countries, the possibility of discussing problems at a regional level offers an important opportunity toward resolving their disputes. The reform aimed at empowering the SAARC Secretary General and strengthening the regional body is likely to get the support of all member countries in light of its significant implications for regional cooperation and stability.

The creation of the SRF will add a significant dimension to the SAARC process. However, a successful launching of the SRF will require a regional consensus among SAARC members as well as the involvement of the United States, China, and other interested nuclear powers and advanced countries. The problems in South Asia have drawn considerable international attention particularly after the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in 1998. The United States is actively involved in diffusing tension and encouraging both countries to restrain their nuclear programs. Similarly, given its concerns about the continued Chinese support in the development of nuclear programs in Pakistan, the United States should be interested

in the SRF—particularly the security segment. Rizvi has argued that “as long as the security concerns are not addressed by some forms of regional or global non-proliferation arrangements that also include India, the current profile of Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programs is not likely to be altered drastically.”⁴⁷ Similarly, regional arrangements involving both Pakistan and China seem necessary to address India’s security concerns. The SRF seems to meet the concerns of both these countries. The SRF, being a forum for forging economic cooperation with other extra-regional members, would be of greater significance to all South Asian countries.

Membership of China in the SRF could be an important event. It would bring three contiguous nuclear neighbors into a regional forum to contribute to stability. Success of the SRF, which, besides its economic agenda, aims at eliminating security sensitivities in South Asia, devising a security mechanism, and ensuring nuclear safety in the region, will largely depend on the cooperative policy of China. However, given the Chinese enthusiasm to play a significant role in regional and international institutions, and the possible economic benefits from an effective economic segment, it may be interested in joining the forum. Moreover, it seems to be in the interest of China to participate in the forum, which is also likely to devise a security framework involving its two nuclear neighbors.

Among other prospective members, Japan has already shown interest in playing a role to reduce tension and ensure stability in South Asia. In view of the significant security implications as well as economic opportunities in the ‘SAARC plus China’ region, other extra-regional members will also have considerable interest in joining the forum that consists of the three recognized nuclear powers of Asia.

Conclusion

The South Asian environment has not changed much despite emphasis on mutual cooperation within the region under the framework of SAARC, the regional organization. The regional mechanism has thus far failed to accelerate the pace of economic development and improve the environment of discord and mistrust among its members. Nevertheless, no fault has particularly been found in the nature of the functioning of the SAARC itself. It became instrumental in identifying and expanding the areas of cooperation and enhancing contacts and interactions in the region at different levels. The problems did not lie in the nature of SAARC but in its scope. SAARC was not devised to address the issues of bilateral disputes and security concerns of the member states, as it was then believed that its focus on socio-economic cooperation would gradually contribute toward reducing the mutual distrust and discord. The evolution of SAARC under its current scope has not been satisfactory. Therefore, a different approach under SAARC is proposed in this article to address the underlying issues besetting the region. The reforms proposed include mechanisms to discuss bilateral and contentious issues thus far avoided in the framework of SAARC, to create a SAARC regional forum and to further strengthen the

role and authority of the Secretary General to initiate appropriate measures in the changed context. The new SAARC is thus expected to ensure regional peace and harmony on the one hand and accelerate the pace of regional cooperation, on the other. Similarly, the new SAARC with its active regional forum involving India, Pakistan and China could also be instrumental in promoting peace and stability beyond South Asia.

NOTES

- ¹ South Asia includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- ² 10th SAARC Summit: Colombo Declaration, 1998.
- ³ Bimal Prasad, "Prospects for Greater Cooperation in South Asia: The Political Dimensions," in Eric Gonsalves and Nancy Jetly, eds., *The dynamics of South Asia: regional cooperation and SAARC*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999). 65.
- ⁴ Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, *ASEAN Experiences of regional and inter-regional cooperation: relevance for SAARC* (Dhaka, 1988). 56.
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