



GLOBAL COOPERATION NEWSLETTER
January 2015

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The 18th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was held on 26-27 November 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal. In the run-up to the Summit, there were hopes of a breakthrough of an economic nature that might be achieved during that important regional event, giving a welcome boost to economic integration in the South Asia region, which despite its huge potential remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. We have asked Ms. Kalpana Jha, a researcher from Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi, to provide some

comments on the outcome of the Kathmandu Summit, also touching upon SAARC's history, its present activities and existing regional challenges. Editor

The background

The initial proposal of establishing SAARC was put forward by former President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh in May 1980 and was quickly supported by Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. The rationale behind the proposal was to improve regional cooperation within South Asia so as to strengthen stability, security and peace in the region. Some specific features included economic goals, such as sharing the water resources of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers among the neighbouring countries, river basin management, promoting regional trade and the overall economic development of

the region in general and in constituent countries in particular. Acceptance of the proposal by India and Pakistan was lukewarm and gradual; the key condition was the exclusion of security-related and bilateral matters outside the scope of the proposed regional cooperation framework.¹ The charter of SAARC was accepted by all seven members in mid-1985, preceded by several meetings of foreign ministers convened to smoothen the existing differences. The thrust behind the eventual agreement was the idea of addressing common challenges and nurturing a shared future, as well as generating an opportunity to improve understanding of one another's problems and to deal with conflicts. Afghanistan became the eighth country to join after the 13th SAARC summit meeting held in 2005. The features that make cooperation unique in this region is the great diversity among countries in terms of land area, GDP, and population, amid substantial similarities with regard to the level of human and economic development.

Cooperation in SAARC is based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states and mutual benefit. Regional cooperation is seen as a complement to the bilateral and multilateral relations of SAARC members. SAARC declarations and conventions have their primary focus centred on human security and democratic governance through the promotion of trade relations among countries. Countering terrorism, the prevention of human trafficking and prostitution, enhancing the welfare of children, the prevention of drug-trafficking and narcotics, and mutual cooperation on criminal matters have been the major focus of SAARC conventions.

However, the region has remained one of the most unstable, with regional cooperation having contributed very little to improving the situation. Internal insecurities, as well as external interventions, have played a decisive role in the current situation in the region. Issues like drug trafficking, terrorism and inter- and intra-regional disputes have besieged South Asia. The trust deficit among the member states has thwarted unity, and that remains, unfortunately, the case until today. That has also contributed to the chronic lack of funds, leading to the failure to address the worst natural calamities, namely, the Bangladesh cyclone of 1991, the Pakistan earthquake in 2005 and the flood in Pakistan in 2010.

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Priyanka Kher. Political Economy of Regional Integration in South Asia, UNCTAD, Geneva, 2012

Despite of all negative factors, the agreement cannot be considered entirely a let-down. A number of significant achievements should be mentioned, such as (i) the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, (ii) the SAARC Agriculture Information Centre at Dhaka, (iii) the SAARC audio-visual exchange programme (SAVE), (iv) the Social Charter, which sets targets for the eradication of poverty, population stabilisation and human-resource development, and (v) the SACODiL (the SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning) and the Heads of Universities Grants Commissions/Equivalent Bodies, which fall to its credit. In addition, the establishment of the South Asian University has been a remarkable achievement in the field of education and research, as well as the exchange of culture among the students of South Asia.

Further, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement, which came into force with the major objective of enhancing the volume of intra-regional trade in South Asia, has engendered hope for broader regional cooperation. Multiple preferential and unilateral trade treaties exist in the region. For example: the bilateral agreements between India and Sri Lanka, such as the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA), which has been operating successfully since 2000, and negotiations towards a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which is still in the pipeline. India has a preferential trade agreement with Afghanistan and trade treaties operating like de facto free trade agreements with Bhutan and Nepal. Exports of all least-developed countries (LDCs) are allowed to enter India free of duty and quota restrictions. Although those preferential and unilateral trade treaties have operated well, they have over-powered the regional trade agreement. SAFTA, which has not been able to lead the regional trade beyond six percent. However, the relevance of SAFTA cannot be underestimated and rather stronger trade relations can be developed by bringing all trade agreements under the ambit of SAFTA. Future possibilities for the formation of a stronger union, similar to the European Union, with a common currency and open borders for all of SAARC, have also emerged, and SAFTA can be an important way forward towards achieving that goal. It is also particularly important to achieve the goal of creating the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU).

As stipulated in the SAARC Charter, economic growth and social development based on justice, equity and democracy are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Hence, economic exchanges might further promote bilateral relations and remain the best way

for enhancing greater stability in the region, as well as for promoting democracy and development at the same time. However, there are important dynamics to be scrutinized in order to understand the core reasons that keep the regional block from consolidating.

The Kathmandu Summit

The 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2014 in November only partially met expectations. The theme of the Summit was 'deeper integration for peace and prosperity'. That focus entailed an emphasis on a deeper integration through the creation of a free trade area with trade liberalization, investment, the elimination of non-tariff barriers, and in general, going beyond traditional market access issues as well as achievement of peace. Issues like terrorism, climate change, regional connectivity and the common market, were tabled; some fresh agenda projects such as the launching of a regional communication satellite, railway services, a SAARC motor-vehicle agreement and energy cooperation were also forwarded. Nepal drafted a 31-point Summit declaration, which comprehensively includes all arenas to be focused on for future development of SAARC, which received the approval of all member countries. Other issues included making concerted efforts to cooperate in "containing communicable diseases like Ebola, HIV/AIDS, etc." Further, forming a more ambitious union with a single currency was another progressive vision presented by the participants. There was also a proposal for the free movement of people and a common visa provision within the SAARC region so as to increase the level of people-to-people contact in the region.

But despite the three important prepared agreements -- dealing with cooperation on energy, easier access for motor vehicles and railways -- only one framework agreement on regional electricity connectivity was signed. This agreement is aimed at cross-border trade in electricity and at creating a seamless power grid across South Asia. Some important agreements were also achieved at the bilateral level; for example, the one regarding better transportation services between India and Nepal. Commenting on the outcome of the Summit, some observers suggested that additional attention should be paid to cooperation at the sub-regional level.²

However the strained relationship between India and Pakistan had a negative impact during the Summit, tarnishing prospects of future cooperation. Those strains have also

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See: Pradumna B. Rana. As SAARC drags its feet, South Asia should turn to sub-regionalism, 25 December 2014, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/12/25/as-saarc-drags-its-feet-south-asia-should-turn-to-sub-regionalism/>

had an impact on the SAFTA enhancement and broader collaboration among the countries in the region.

The existing challenges

Historically, there is one important factor that keeps South Asia divided and should be taken into consideration in any analysis. It is the fact that SAARC is composed of countries sharing "unequal eminence" geographically as well as economically. SAARC members give the impression of being fragments of a "whole". With India and Pakistan sharing a vindictive history of separation, it is not a rivalry that is expressed at the ideological level, the economic level or the security level, but this is a mistrust generated between the power regimes in both countries. Similar situation exists in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Bhutan is another country that has remained a direct protectorate of India. Sri Lanka and India also has shared a strained political relationship with regard to the "Tamil Tigers" movements, while Nepal's nationalism has always been centred on anti-Indian slogans.

While sovereignty is often understood in terms of civilizational distinctness, the SAARC countries are composed of overlapping identities that blur the existing identity boundaries but also strengthen insecurities. In that context India, being the single most powerful nation in the region, has been perceived as the source of insecurity by the smaller states rather than a binding factor. On the other hand, India has sometimes viewed SAARC as a ganging-up of smaller nations against India. In addition, China's joining as an observer to the organization and its push to being a member state have clearly generated further ambiguity in the existing incongruent relationship between India and other smaller nations. Obviously, equal trade relations cannot be established in an unequal and ambiguous bilateral political environment, where the economic relations in the current global scenario are guided by the dynamic interplay of culture, politics and economy.

The problems in South Asia are multi-faceted. The conceptualization of state was often not based on a uniform vision but on contrasting ideas. The contrasting idea of democracy is explained by the regime structure that those states adapted. Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan are conceptualised exclusively on theological lines. Pakistan conceptualised its statehood on Islamic-based principles, and Nepal went on to being the only *Hindu rashtra* in the world. The inability to adequately solve minority language

challenges has led Sri Lanka into a perpetual conflict; Bangladesh underscored its identity through linguistic differences with Pakistan. The autocratic military regime in Pakistan, existing governance problems in Afghanistan and the monarchical rule in Nepal have added complexity, not just to the regional conceptualization of democracy but also the globally developing understanding of democracy. India, on the other hand, is a vigorous democratic nation that incorporates vast diversity, which may be considered as the defining idea of India.

All of the above factors contribute to a very different understanding in South Asia of what is a state and what is freedom. Further, that kind of contradictory development regarding the idea of state has created deep ideological divides among the member states, thwarting regional cooperation and resulting in the disappointing progress of SAARC. Instead of carving out a common ground for coalescing, the member states have rather been focusing on designing mechanisms aimed at countering each other and at protecting one's sovereignty against the other. The religious and cultural diversity that could have been the tool to cooperation has played an instrumental role in keeping the rifts fresh. Domestic conflicts still pervade South Asia and are predominantly centred on the religious and cultural diversity informed by economic interests.

Therefore, the existence of conflicting ideologies and the functional paradigm of the predominant cooperation pattern have kept the region from developing into a powerful economically integrated block, despite the existence of all the required resources. In the face of such an incongruent partnership, only solving the bilateral issues on a priority basis can provide a breakthrough, leading to a qualitatively new vision for regional cooperation in South Asia.

The opinions expressed in the article are those of the author and should not be equated with any opinions that may be held by ICSW Management Committee or the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi.

➤ ***A Universal Call to Action to Transform our World beyond 2015***

The long-awaited and much anticipated Synthesis Report of the UN Secretary-General released in December 2014 states that the world is "at a historic crossroads, and the directions we take will determine whether we will succeed or fail on our promises. With our globalized economy and sophisticated technology, we can decide to end the age-old ills of extreme poverty and hunger. Or we can continue to degrade our planet and allow intolerable inequalities to sow bitterness and despair. Our ambition is to achieve

sustainable development for all”.

According to the report, the year 2015 offers a unique opportunity for global leaders and people to end poverty, transform the world to better meet human needs and the necessities of economic transformation, while protecting our environment, ensuring peace and realizing human rights. Member States requested the Secretary-General to synthesize the full range of inputs available on the post-2015 development agenda and to present a synthesis report before the end of 2014, as an input to the intergovernmental negotiations. Drawing from the experience of two decades of development practice and from the inputs gathered through an open and inclusive process, the report charts a road map to the achievement of dignity in the next 15 years.

The report proposes one universal and transformative agenda for sustainable development, underpinned by rights, and with people and the planet at the center. An integrated set of six essential elements is provided to help frame and reinforce the sustainable development agenda and ensure that the ambition and vision expressed by Member States is communicated and delivered at the country level: (a) dignity: to end poverty and fight inequality; (b) people: to ensure healthy lives, knowledge and the inclusion of women and children; (c) prosperity: to grow a strong, inclusive and transformative economy; (d) planet: to protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children; (e) justice: to promote safe and peaceful societies and strong institutions; and (f) partnership: to catalyse global solidarity for sustainable development.

The report also underscores that an integrated sustainable development agenda requires an equally synergistic framework of means for its implementation, including financing, technology and investments in sustainable development capacities. In addition, the report calls for embracing a culture of shared responsibility in order to ensure that promises made become actions delivered. To that effect, the report proposes a framework to be able to monitor and review implementation, based on enhanced statistical capacities and tapping into the potential of new and non-traditional data sources, and a United Nations system “fit for purpose” to address the challenges of the new agenda. Achieving dignity in the next 15 years is possible if we collectively mobilize political will and the necessary resources to strengthen the multilateral system and our nations.

For more details please go to:

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/700&Lang=E

➤ ***On the road to the Joint World Conference in Seoul.***

Representatives of the three partner organizations—International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) got together on 20-22 January 2015 in Vancouver, Canada, to discuss the preparatory process for the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development scheduled to take place in Seoul, Republic of Korea, in June 2016. The priority theme of the Conference is “Promoting the Dignity and Worth of People”.

The agenda of the Vancouver meeting included the progress reports submitted by the Local Organizing Committee (LOC) and the International Program Committee (IPC) – both established by the partner organizations in cooperation with the hosts of the Conference. It also included a discussion on the implementation of the Global Agenda, the existing priorities and organizational developments. The meeting was attended by all three Presidents of IASSW, ICSW and IFSW—Vimla Nadkarni, Michael Cichon and Ruth Stark respectively, who took active part in the frank and productive discussions.

The participants of the meeting discussed the list of speakers selected by the IPC and proposed pertinent changes aimed at better geographical distribution as well as gender balance among the invited speakers. The participants also discussed the issue of conference finances, including the proposed level of registration fees. It was noted that the proposed budget is based on the assumption of a relatively high attendance (3,000+ conference participants), including at least projected one-third domestic attendees.

It was agreed that there is a need to develop a local and international promotional strategy for the Conference, including closer cooperation between the three partners at the national and regional levels. The need to have an agreed outcome document of the Conference was also underscored.

It was noted that there is a plan to open the call for abstracts one year ahead of the Conference. It was agreed that the participation of practitioners in the Joint World Conference is as important as the participation of academics, and every effort should be

made to facilitate such participation. If the submission of an abstract is a condition of scholarship applications, then the need to give time to practitioners to submit abstracts as part of their funding application is essential. That might pose a challenge, given the proposed early deadline for abstracts.

The meeting of the Global Agenda Coordination Group, which was part of the Vancouver meeting, focused on the implementation of the Global Agenda, including the specifics of the preparation of the next report on the priority theme to be presented in Seoul in 2016.

➤ ***Useful resources and links***

1. Regional Integration in South Asia : Trends, Challenges and Prospects. London, 2014

Mohammad A. Razzaque and Jurendra Basnett (eds.)

The report prepared by the Commonwealth Secretariat presents an objective assessment of trade and economic co-operation among South Asian nations and highlights policy issues aimed at fostering regional integration.

Written by influential analysts and researchers, the volume's 24 chapters include perspectives from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and examinations of new areas of cooperation, such as investment, regional supply chains, energy and cross-border transport networks.

For more details please go to: <http://books.thecommonwealth.org/regional-integration-south-asia-hardback>

2. The Impacts of Universalization. A Case Study on Thailand's Social Protection and Universal Health Coverage. UNRISD, Geneva, 2014

Prapaporn Tivayanond Mongkhonvanit and Piya Hanvoravongchai

The working paper prepared for UNRISD examines specifics of health policy in Thailand and identifies key drivers for the universalization of health care in the country. The trends of social security extension are analyzed in the context of policy and institutional linkages between health care, economic policies and social protection.

For more details please go to:
<http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/search/4712B9641EDCF852C1257DA2004DE30C?OpenDocument>

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