

Impediments to the Success of SAARC

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Introduction

A number of queries will be raised in this research paper, regarding the mechanism and utility of international regional organizations. We will address ourselves, trying to look for a clue that why Pakistan joined these organizations; both security related and groupings with economic preferences. We would investigate the rationale for Pakistani membership as well as the diminishing results of these regional groupings. In the era of Cold War, i.e. 1950s to 1970s, the focal point of Pakistan's foreign policy remained in cooperation with the regional countries for the uplift of its security needs; notwithstanding that Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) were American sponsored. However, we cannot ignore the fact that co-members like Iran and Turkey were Pakistan's closest allies; regardless of the fact that these three countries coordinated their policies within the grand design of American containment of the communist ideology.

We would look into those factors; responsible for the slackness of RCD and its forerunner ECO, when its nomenclature was changed in 1980s. Pakistan experimented with yet another regional organization in South Asian region, *South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation* (SAARC), mainly at the behest of then Bangladesh President General Zia urRehman; who felt that Indian dominance could only be dampened if the smaller countries of the region grouped together to coordinate their economic relations. However, India also joined this organization reluctantly.

There are examples of regional trading blocs, scattered around the globe, which have developed into more comprehensive legal and economic unions. Technical advancement of the latter half of the twentieth century has reduced the distances and facilitated swift and reliable transportation of profitable trading goods.

South Asia is one of the poorest regions in the world. It is densely populated but comparatively scarcely educated territory. People of this area have many historical commonalities as well as differences. The people, of this resourceful but mismanaged and ill maintained area, had realized that salvation lies in acceptable mutual cooperation and dependable mutual assistance.

The primary focus of this research will be on the establishment, aims, objectives and weaknesses of SAARC. It was established almost thirty years ago

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with intensions to boost mutual reliance and cooperation. This paper is an attempt to evaluate the primary causes of non-cooperation between the major SAARC members: as well as all other members. Along with that, the potentials and prospects of promoting cooperation, between the members, will also be highlighted.

According to Dr. Kheffens(1988), “A regional arrangement is a voluntary association of sovereign states within a certain area or having common interest in that area for a joint purpose which should not be of an offensive nature in relation to that area”. Keeping in mind such principles, one needs to identify the place, role and significance of regional organizations in the international setup. Willy Brandt (2001), the famous German Chancellor, had said that an appreciable economic world order could be facilitated and ensured through regional organizations; which help countries harmonize their interests more efficiently.

Establishment of SAARC

SAARC was not established overnight. It took almost five years from the first floating of an idea of such an organization in 1980 by Zia-ur-Rehman; the then President of Bangladesh. Preparatory meetings were held before the first Summit in Dhaka in 1985. In May 1980, the formal letter was sent to all the South Asian countries in which the formation of a regional group (SAARC) was proposed. On 25 November 1980, a document by the name of “Bangladesh Working Paper” was sent to all countries of the region. The Foreign Secretaries met in 1981 in Colombo Sri-Lanka and Foreign Ministers met in 1983 in New Delhi and identified areas of regional cooperation.

The Heads of States and governments, at the Dhaka Summit, expressed their determination to cooperate regionally in the spirit of friendship, trust and mutual understanding (Umar,1988; “SAARC areas of cooperation” 2014). This declaration is known as “Dhaka Declaration” and was issued on December 08, 1985. The Charter of SAARC was adopted and principles of cooperation were finalized (“Dhaka Declaration” 1985).

A: Similarities among SAARC Members

Bangladesh, as the primary catalyst of the idea, circulated a document, “Bangladesh Papers”. It not only highlighted the significance of this region and importance of cooperation between the countries of this region but also pointed out areas of cooperation; despite severe hostilities between South Asian countries. It also highlighted similarities among the regional countries. The list of similarities between the South Asian countries includes strategic location of the region, geographic coherence and absence of natural borders, presence of infrastructural links, economic underdevelopment, agricultural backwardness, social backwardness, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. Despite all these similarities,

there was, and still is, a huge regional trade imbalance between the neighbors in South Asia (Umar, 1998).

B: Charter of the SAARC

The charter of the organization was formally adopted on 8th December 1985 by the Heads of States or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

According to the Charter, SAARC was established to provide a platform, to the governments of South Asia, to negotiate and resolve mutual differences; for the sake of public welfare and mutual benefit and development. The idea was to bring the people of South Asia closer to each other to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. It aimed at promoting the welfare of the people of South Asia and at improving their quality of life through fast economic growth, social progress and cultural development.

The following principles were to be respected and followed while maintaining cooperation in the SAARC countries (“SAARC Charter” 2014).

- a) Sovereign equality
- b) Territorial integrity
- c) Political independence
- d) Non-interference in internal affairs of member states
- e) Mutual benefits through promotion of peace and cooperation
- f) Adherence to the Un Charter and principles of Non-Alignment
- g) Promotion of economic, social and technical cooperation and projection of cultural similarities.

Despite all good intentions and high spirits, SAARC could not develop as a productive organization. Identifying the root causes of such ineffectiveness need to be explored in detail.

Causes of Non-effectiveness of SAARC

A successful regional bloc is supposed to be basically a trading bloc. SAARC could not even take primary steps towards the promotion of mutual trade. The deficiency is not unique to SAARC. Several regional organizations could not become successful; particularly when all the members were underdeveloped countries. Small size of local markets, lack of strong industrial basis, traditional concentration on producing consumer goods, weak infrastructure and socio-economic problems are one of the main reasons for their failure.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif (2001) said in Colombo Summit 1998, “The Primary reason for the failure of SAARC to live up to its promise lies in the fact that it excludes the discussion of political problems. Peace is inseparable from progress and development”.

The SAARC was established with high spirits and intensions to establish lasting peace in the region and for solving the problems of the people living in this

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region. This organization, despite its established offices and several permanent institutions, could neither become an effective and productive institution nor could develop as an effective disputes resolving mechanism. It could not even play any remarkable role in facilitating and improving the lifestyles of the member countries. There are several factors responsible for barring the working of SAARC as an effective and efficient source of conflict resolution and as a tool of increasing cooperation. These factors and causes are divided into two basic categories for discussion facilitation.

A: Structural Causes

There are several structural reasons that have incapacitated SAARC from the beginning to become an effective organization.

I: The SAARC Charter

The Charter of the SAARC established the objectives of the organization; on the day of its establishment. These objectives included; (“SAARC Charter” 2014).

1. Promoting welfare, enhancing quality of life and providing opportunities for dignified life to the people living in the member countries.
2. Working for cultural development and social progress among the member states.
3. Promoting cooperation, economic growth and self-reliance among the member states.
4. Cooperating with other countries and organizations, for collective good.

A careful analysis of these objectives reveals that almost all the objectives concentrated on promoting cooperation among members but this cooperation was primarily concentrating in cultural, economic and social sectors. Promotion of self-reliance was mentioned but not institutionalized. The objectives appear to be catchy but are, practically, hard to achieve and even harder to operationalize; particularly in the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust among the members.

II: Agreements and Conventions

Almost all the agreements and conventions, adopted and signed by SAARC members, are concentrating on promotion of economic and social interactions and relations. There is hardly any significant development, under the banner of SAARC, to promote mutual trust and resolve mutual disputes (“SAARC Agreements and Conventions”2014). Dispute resolving has been, unfortunately, left out of the scope of SAARC; since its inception. Even “SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism” was nothing but ratification and implementation of the UN resolutions and conventions (“SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism” 2014).

III: SAARC Bodies

Almost all SAARC bodies and subsidiary bodies and offices are working in the social fields. Political fields and enhancement of trust and promotion of cooperation in political fields have been left out of the focus; unfortunately (“SAARC Recognized Bodies”2014).

Such structural flaws do not allow SAARC to play any productive role in conflict resolution in this conflicts ridden region.

B: Functional Causes

There are several functional and regional reasons which have, and still are, hampering the promotion of cooperation and trust among the members; the absence of which is the primary reason of non-effectiveness of SAARC.

I: Demographic structure of the region

According to some writers, the demographic distinctiveness of SAARC region is one of the major reasons for the ineffectiveness of SAARC (Zaman, 2014). Some consider backwardness in education and economic system as major reasons for the failure of SAARC (Atif; Farooq, 2014). While, on the other hand, some writers hold the size, influence and centralized position of India, in the region, responsible for SAARC’s jeopardized position and performance.

India is a major country in the region. It has a vast territory, houses a great number of population and shares borders with almost all SAARC members. This distinctive feature has made South Asia, according to some writers, ‘India – centric’;(Hajni, 2014)

“In terms of territory, population, natural resources, military might and economic strength, India is enjoying the most predominant position in the region. 76% area of the total region of the south Asia belongs to India. Its population is 77% of the total population of the South Asia and its GDP is 71% of the total GDP of South Asia. It shares borders with all the member countries of south Asia (except Afghanistan which has joined the organization very recently). As a result of this dominant position it is but natural that India can play a sort of hegemonic role in the region. This in return creates a sense of insecurity among the other member countries and thus puts a negative impact on the performance of SAARC”

This distinctive feature, of South Asia, has deep effects on the working and success chances of SAARC.

II: Mutual Conflicts of Members

Most of the members have several conflicts with each other. Any act of cooperation and interaction is seen suspiciously by almost all the members. In this scenario of trust deficit, one must not forget the central position of India, "India is both literally and otherwise central to South Asia" (Kumar, 2014).

In order to better understand the situations that hamper the development of SAARC as an effective and efficient body, we must look into the conditions of relations of member countries of SAARC with India one by one.

India – Bangladesh

Soon after its creation in 1971, Bangladesh signed a 25 years "Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation" with India on 19 March 1972, but it could not last long. Within a decade, several conflicts, including border disputes emerged between the two countries. Several territorial claims, border disputes and water distribution issues like Farraka Barrage, which was constructed in 1974 to control the waters of Ganges River, rose between the two countries. India is an upper riparian of Ganges River and wants to use more water while Bangladesh, as a lower riparian, opposes this arrangement because it will cause a shortage of water for fertile agricultural lands of Bangladesh (Datta, 2010). India and Bangladesh had border disputes with each other since 1971. They had to face severe border clashes in March 2001. India had started fencing its borders with Bangladesh in 1984. The dispute rose between the two countries and tensions caused firing across the international border. The disputes were recently solved in 82nd India Bangladesh joint border conference, in August 2013 ("The Hindu" 2013). The land boundary agreement in 1974 decided to provide a passage between Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves. In 1982, India agreed to handover the enclave, but there have been some serious setbacks and disagreements between the two countries, until very recently when the disputes were settled in 2013 ("The Hindu" 2013). Bangladeshis have been crossing into India for decades. India is concerned about massive border crossing by Bangladeshis while Bangladesh rejects Indian allegation and says that there have been no such illegal crossing by Bangladeshis into India ("The Bangladesh Observer" 1986). Bangladesh and India also have disputes regarding Maritime Boundary and South Talperry; New Moore Island. Some Bangladeshi rulers have tried to establish good relations with China to counter Indian hegemonic attitude. Christopher H. Bateman said "Shadow of India will always loom over Bangladesh quest for securing because India would not like to take over a 'religiously hostile' population which is even less economically developed" (Bateman, 1979).

India – Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka went under Portuguese and Dutch control in 16th and 17th Century and eventually went under British control at the end of 18th Century AD. They started bringing Tamil laborers, from Southern India, to work in tea and coffee fields, in 1815 (“BBC Asia, Sri Lanka Profile” 2013). Soon after independence in 1948, Tamils developed differences with the majority Sinhalese which resulted into a long series of conflicts and riots; leaving hundreds of people dead and seriously wounded. A separatist organization “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” (LTTE) was established in 1976 to protect the rights of the Tamils (“BBC Asia, Sri Lanka Profile” 2013). The problem was finally resolved in 2009 when LTTE was finally defeated and wiped out completely (Rajapaksa, 2009).

India has been accused of supporting Tamils but had also sent its troops, in 1987, to help Sri Lankan government. India though later on withdrew its peace keeping force, in 1990, but Sri Lankan government still believes that India had helped the Tamil activists (Colman, 2009).

Assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, on 21 May, 1991, is also labeled against LTTE; to avenge Indian role in Tamil issue (Pickert, 2009).

India – Bhutan

Bhutan and India do not have any direct conflicts. Both the countries had signed a bilateral treaty in 1949-50. This treaty is still operative. In 1979, King of Bhutan had demanded revision of the treaty but Indian leadership did not pay any attention. Bhutan has been trying to increase good relations with China to gain independent identification. India, on the other hand, does not like Chinese influence in Bhutan very much. It considers Bhutan as its dependent and wants to keep it so as well. Bhutan has though adopted some opposite instances at international level, against Indian will, yet both the countries do not have any active conflictive situation or relations.

India – Nepal

India and Nepal had signed a treaty of bilateral relations in 1950. Nepal has always been under strong political pressure from India. No anti-Indian government could hold strong in Nepal. Nepal had also been seeing help from China regarding infrastructure development and political problems which are mostly engineered by India. The Nepalese proposal of declaring Nepal as a ‘Zone of Peace’ issued on 25 February, 1975 has always been criticized by India. This difference in opinion causes minor differences among political leaderships in Indian and Nepal. Nepal also blames India frequently for its hegemonic attitude and unnecessary interference into personal affairs of Nepal.

India – Maldives

Maldives, as compared to other SAARC countries, is relatively farther from India. It is a group of islands with a Muslim majority population. In early November 1988, a group of almost 400 mercenary Tamil guerrillas, in a surprise attack by boats, tried to attempt a coup in Mali. Maldives sent a distress call for help to SAARC countries, U.S. and Britain. India responded quickly and landed 1600 Hara troops backed by a fleet. It is said that Liberation tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had been offered two million U.S. dollars for this operation (Umer, 1988).

India – Pakistan

Pakistan and India came into being after a long rivalry between the Hindus and the Muslims of the Sub-continent. United India was divided on the basis of Two Nation Theory. This gap between ideologies was further widened by mutual conflicts arising during the independence process. The border disputes, transfer of assets problems and, most prominently, the problems of annexation of three independent states have always kept Pakistan and India at daggers drawn against each other. Kashmir has been a bone of contention between the two countries; along with several other social, political, cultural and border disputes and problems. Some Indian scholars consider partition of India as a “strategic individuality of the sub-continent” (Sareen, 1984). While some other thinkers consider boundary adjustments, by Radcliff, as inequitable. Pakistan and India have fought three wars (1948, 1965 and 1971) and a battle (at Kargil 1998) and are facing conflicting situation in Siachin Glacier (Since 1983). The region had been suffering from an arms race since 1950s due to rising tensions and conflicts between India and Pakistan.

Both the countries have many mutual agreements; to resolve disputes. River water disputes were settled through Indus Water Basin Treaty of 1960. Most of the peace treaties between the two countries came after the wars; The Inter-dominion or Karachi Agreement in 1949 came after 1948 war. The Tashkent Declaration of 1966 came after 1965 war. Simla Agreement of 1972 came after 1971 war. In Simla Agreement of 1972, both the countries had agreed to, “Refrain from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of each other.” (Umer, 1988).

There are some people who are of the opinion that new settlements and setups in South Asia demand increased cooperation between India and Pakistan. Some even see cooperation in Afghanistan as an opportunity to bring old enemies closer to each other (Hameed, 2012).

Though there have been many rounds of talks between India and Pakistan regarding bilateral problems and differences yet none of them could bring out remarkable results which may bring both the countries closer to each other on permanent basis.

Significance of the SAARC

The importance of SAARC is, and has always been, undeniable. Regional countries were aware of the significance of such regional organization when they had established it; almost thirty years ago. They are aware of its significance even today; when they regularly participate in its meetings and reiterate pledges to make it a successful and productive organization. It has always maintained its office work and has almost successfully managed to hold Summit meetings; as well as Foreign Minister Meetings and meetings of Foreign Secretaries.

SAARC despite all its setbacks has still survived. Its importance is mentioned briefly as the following. Firstly, South Asia is a homeland of densely populated mostly illiterate people living in extreme poverty and suffering from worst health conditions and extremely inhuman governmental behavior. All these problems require an immediate solution. Secondly, South Asia has been suffering from constant threats to security both from internal conflicts between the regional powers and external states trying to establish their hegemonic superiority over this region. Thirdly, SAARC had not come into being after any recommendation or direct effort by super powers of the world. It was not even an idea given by strong nations of the area. Rather it was an initiative taken by the smaller states of the region. Gen. Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh was the first person who thought about it and persuaded other rulers in the region to unite under a regional organization. Fourthly, SAARC was established by local leaders and countries purely. No outside superpower played any role in the establishment of SAARC. It was established by the local people to fulfill the requirements of local people living in the same region. Fifthly, SAARC mainly emphasizes on socio-economic development. Despite all rivalries between India and Pakistan and differences between India and most of the regional countries, SAARC was established by the regional countries by themselves and was not imposed like SEATO and CENTO by any foreign power. Therefore, these countries have kept this organization alive despite all their rivalries and conflicts. The idea of keeping it related to socio-economic aspect only was adopted so that political differences may not cause a breakdown in the working of SAARC. Finally, SAARC was established to increase diplomatic, social and economic relations among the member countries. Though practically it could not achieve its objectives yet it has survived even during the most serious political crises among India and Pakistan and among India and Sri Lanka (Cheema, 2013). Despite all efforts, SAARC has remained inefficient primarily due to political differences between India and Pakistan generally and of India with rest of the member countries generally.

Conclusion

SAARC was established, as mentioned in the introduction, on 8th December 1985 and General Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh was the exponent of this idea and had personally convinced the leaders of the South Asian countries to form such an

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organization as may work for the welfare of the people living in South Asia. This area was, and still is, the home of the poor, ill feed and illiterate people; who also lack good health facilities along with several other basic needs of life. South Asia is also the most densely populated area of the world.

The objectives of the SAARC were to promote cooperation at social and economic level and to promote good neighborly relations among the members. SAARC could not become a strong and effective body and could not promote mutual relations among its member countries for the following reasons. Firstly, tensions between India and Pakistan particularly and differences between India and rest of the member countries- Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal- generally do not allow SAARC to become an influential institution which can weld the member countries in closer cooperation. Secondly, all the SAARC member countries have almost same production patterns and fields and depend mostly on agricultural output. This clash of economic interests could have been avoided if members would have voluntarily shifted to those areas where they could enjoy competitive advantage and could make more profits by producing at massive level. Thirdly, member countries have continued the policy of import substitution industrialization (IS) instead of trade diversion. Fourthly, the differences and conflicts among the member countries could not be resolved because the Charter of the SAARC aimed only at establishing economic and social relations; which are impossible to prolong without strong political relations based on mutual trust. Fifthly, international environment in the last decades has compelled the developing countries to form alliance or maintain strong affiliations with the developed countries of the world. Countries like Pakistan are still bound to have good relations with the sole super power of the world: America; particularly after the demise of former Soviet Union. This attitude does not allow mutual trust and cooperation to flourish on strong basis. Finally, the SAARC remained as a paper lion because of Indian hegemonic designs.

Many significant developments have taken place in South Asia in the new Millennium. The geo strategic role and significance, of this region, have increased more than ever. Technological advancements and shift in the techno-economic hub of the world, from Europe to Asia, has not only highlighted the significance of this region but has also opened new avenues of development and promotion. Mutual cooperation, between the SAARC members, can produce fruitful for almost all the members. India has emerged as an 'IT' developing country. The skilled labour of South Asia has started asserting its importance in the international market. Still South Asia is among one of the poorest and densely populated areas of the world. It is poorly governed, hunger struck area where the gap between the rich and the poor is still widening. Almost half the population, in South Asian countries, is unfortunately still illiterate. Joblessness among the educated is increasing and frustration is rising among the youth. Nuclear confrontation between the two major powers of the region, India and Pakistan, has caused a great deal of tension among both the countries. Though they are trying to come in closer cooperation

with each other yet problems of great significance are still lying unsolved and are restricting these countries from establishing trustworthy long term relations.

There is a dire need to take several steps to promote peace and cooperation in the region and make SAARC an effective and influential regional organization. The most important of these are firstly, settlement of unsettled disputes among the member states. Secondly, lessening of long lasting cultural differences; which have become national patterns and trends now. Thirdly, independence from foreign influences and interferences; which have not allowed the regional countries to unite together on strong footings. Finally, the ruling elites of almost all South Asian countries always try to make decisions according to their own desires and wishes and, usually, do not take into consideration the needs and problems of their people and countries.

Pakistan and India are major members of SAARC. SAARC could not lift off as a successful association because of the authoritative role and attitude of India and apprehensive behaviour of Pakistan. The member countries were not ready to accept the superiority of India and India, on the other hand, never agreed on negotiating on equal basis with its neighbours.

“More and more contacts, through regional cooperation, will inevitably lead to greater understanding. This, in turn, will dissipate mistrust, promote goodwill and help reduce the waste and diversion of resources to unproductive uses.”

(Zia-ul-Haq) (President of Pakistan addressing the first SAARC Summit at Dhaka in 1985).

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