

# ISAS Special Report

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## **Towards a ‘People’s SAARC’: The ISAS-COSATT-KAS Joint Workshop on “Re-Energising the SAARC Process”**

*The workshop on “Re-Energising the SAARC Process” took place in Singapore on 21 August 2017. Featuring eminent scholars and former policy makers from Singapore and the South Asian region, the event examined the current deadlock in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and explored ways in which it could be revitalised and transformed into a ‘People’s SAARC’. The workshop was jointly organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies, the Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung of Germany.*

Silvia Tieri<sup>1</sup>

A workshop on “Re-Energising the SAARC Process” was organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), in association with the Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), in Singapore on 21 August 2017. The one-day workshop was aimed at discussing ways in which the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could be revitalised. As the SAARC still stands as the only regional platform bringing together all South Asian countries, its effectiveness remains critical for the promotion of peace and prosperity in the region.

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The workshop included an inaugural panel discussion, followed by two others, during which eminent scholars and former policy makers representing various countries of the region presented a paper and explored the future of the SAARC.

Professor Subrata Kumar Mitra, Director and Visiting Research Professor at ISAS, opened the workshop, underlying the importance of the theme and its relevance to the current political circumstances. Professor Mitra briefly outlined ISAS' history, mandate and approach to research. He thanked the Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) in Kathmandu, represented by Dr Nishchal Pandey, also Convenor of COSATT, for collaborating with ISAS to organise the event, and KAS for the support which made it possible.

Professor Mitra proposed a theoretical approach to the issue of the SAARC deadlock. As a scholar of political science, he drew attention to the core area of possible cooperation between different actors. They could come together if pushed to do so by a *hegemon*, an existing *legal framework*, or an *ideational element* binding the respective elites. According to the author R Axelrod, for example, four elements are necessary for cooperation among egoist actors to take place – *knowledge*, *proximity*, *reciprocity* and *recursiveness*. In that light, Professor Mitra invited the panellists to discuss the reasons that make cooperation in South Asia difficult and what could be the SAARC's legacy for generations to come.

Dr Pandey expressed satisfaction in working with ISAS, which, he believed, had emerged as an excellent South Asia-focused think-tank. He spoke about COSATT, whose main aim was to propose new faces, fresh ideas and an alternative discourse to correct the current analysis of the region. The consortium, an organiser of conferences throughout South Asia, was proud that some of its publications were today part of school curricula.

Dr Pandey observed that cooperation in the subcontinent was difficult because third-party mediation was not being encouraged, and the elites were not close enough to each other to coordinate efforts. All hopes, therefore, were still placed on the SAARC. However, with the pace of work of the organisation remaining paralysed, people were now getting impatient and looking for tangible progress. He also commented that, while the problems awaiting solution were clearly identified in a number of declarations, in practice they had not been addressed effectively so far. Poverty remained a prevalent problem in South Asia, he emphasised.

In contrast to the SAARC, other regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the North American Free Trade Agreement, the European Union (EU), and the Eurasian Economic Community had progressed significantly. Dr Pandey concluded that it was, therefore, necessary to effectively implement the now-purely declaratory decisions of the SAARC.

Mr Christian Echle from KAS concluded the round of inaugural remarks by the organising institutions. A journalist by training with a long experience in the social media sector, Mr Echle leads the Regional Programme, Political Dialogue Asia/Singapore of KAS. The Programme has various *foci*, including security, counterterrorism, exchanges between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Asia, and a KAS school for young politicians, which aims to empower young leaders. It also has a partnership with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and COSATT. Mr Echle mentioned that KAS itself was a think tank figuring in the list of top-ten European think-tanks.

Speaking on the issue of regional cooperation and integration, Mr Echle touched on three key points. Drawing a parallel between European and South Asian integration, he recalled the foundation moments of the EU. In his view, the European experiment succeeded through a coincidence of great leadership and right circumstances. KAS, too, had been directly involved in the process of unifying Europe, from collaborating with Gen De Gaulle to the signing of the Franco-German friendship treaty.

Mr Echle also spoke about the strategy adopted by Europe with regard to historical memory. A continent torn apart by wars for centuries, Europe was today dealing with its past by promoting the memories of both positive and inglorious episodes of its history. Such a culture of commemoration, very strong in countries like Germany, was fundamental to the development of an open environment within the continent, in which nations that previously used to be enemies could finally come together and discuss frankly about common issues.

Mr Echle concluded his address by emphasising the importance of engaging the youth in the creation of a common consciousness. He highlighted the Erasmus programme, sponsored by the EU, which was continuing to provide students with an opportunity to grow as European citizens and cultivate a trans-national identity.

Mr Amjad Sial, Secretary General of the SAARC, delivered his speech via the videoconference. He welcomed the effort at the workshop to address a topical theme, and expressed hope that the event would contribute to revitalise the organisation. He explained that the summit, held biennially or earlier when circumstances necessitated, was the highest political event in the SAARC process and provided policy direction to the organisation.

Mr Sial described some of the projects promoted by the SAARC in the field of connectivity, the South Asia University, and the more recent proposal of a SAARC Medical University. He stressed the need for regular interactions among scholars, artists and people, fundamental to promote friendship among the citizens of the region. He also called for the enhancement of the institutional capacity of the SAARC Secretariat, necessary to make the policy directions effective.

According to Mr Sial, a demand-driven and policy-objective cooperation in the fields of energy, environment and economic cooperation should be the next target of the SAARC. It would also be desirable that the SAARC participate in other international *fora* presenting a strong and cohesive position to which all members would adhere.

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Principal Research Fellow at ISAS and former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, delivered the vote of thanks which concluded the inaugural panel session. In his speech, Dr Chowdhury recalled that he had the privilege of being present at the *stellar moment* of the creation of the SAARC. He said that the SAARC was born from the initiative of a small group of individuals, influenced by the theories of the functionalist David Mitrany. The process had, since its beginning, been poisoned by the reciprocal mistrust between the two biggest countries in the region, as Pakistan felt that the SAARC was India-driven while India considered it to be “a clubbing together of the smaller fellows”.

Dr Chowdhury revealed that work started very cautiously, with a foreign secretaries’ conference in 1981. Following a second meeting in the same year, the initiators were able to obtain the clearances from India, Pakistan and the other South Asian countries, which allowed the initiative to finally take off. The SAARC was created in this way and its first summit took place in Dhaka in 1985. Its functioning was bounded to some basic rules: the organisation would have no debate on Kashmir and water issues, and all decisions would be taken by consensus. Dr Chowdhury observed that such restrictions made ineffectiveness

congenital to the SAARC, which he described as a “recipe for failure”. The relations among the member countries were too complex and made the risk of being caught in a Thucydides’ trap inescapable.

He explained that, in order to overcome such fears, the SAARC’s supporters decided to begin the collaboration on minor issues, hoping that successful outcomes would expand the collaboration to other sectors. Today, however, the SAARC would seem to be on the verge of collapse. The political situation of South Asia, a region troubled by fundamentalism, majoritarian politics and the narrowing of the secular space makes it urgent to identify the way ahead. Dr Chowdhury concluded by calling for a transformation of the organisation into a ‘People’s SAARC’ – the only way to revitalise its functioning.

### **Current Deadlock in the SAARC: Initiatives, Hurdles and Possibilities**

Dr Chowdhury chaired the first panel discussion on “Current deadlock in the SAARC: Initiatives, Hurdles and Possibilities”. The panellists were Mr Ramesh Nath Pandey, former Foreign Minister of Nepal; Major General (Ret’d) Dipankar Banerjee, Member of the Forum for Strategic Initiatives, New Delhi, India; Major General (Ret’d) A N M Muniruzzaman, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies; Ambassador Md Touhid Hossain, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh; and Dr Dinusha Panditaratne, Executive Director of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Mr Pandey welcomed the initiative that brought COSATT and ISAS to cooperate with each other. He said that the SAARC had to face scepticism since its very inception. Relations among the members were not cordial at the time, and considerable effort was needed to build friendship, trust, mutual understanding and respect. Alternative approaches to regional cooperation, such as the South Asia Group, were also experimented with.

Mr Pandey said that it was the South Asian policy makers’ duty to re-energise the SAARC process because a stronger SAARC would be in South Asia’s collective interest. The current time was ripe for such a step, and a new initiative should be taken to bridge the cultural gap

and understanding, especially the gap that continued to divide India and Pakistan. He observed that the SAARC meetings were ceremonial and not substantive, a reality that should not continue any longer, considering the recent emergence of South Asia as a new centre of international politics. He called for the need to make South Asia emerge as a political force for the mutual benefit of its people.

Major General Banerjee began by speaking about COSATT – he explained that the idea of the consortium came from the realisation that, in South Asia, also, think-tanks often had a troubled and short life. COSATT was born in 2008 after a very promising conference was held in New Delhi, and following consultations with the KAS representative in the Indian capital.

Major General Banerjee then provided a historical overview as a background for his analysis of the current situation in South Asia. He illustrated the potential of the SAARC by comparing the present situation in South Asia with the pre-western colonial era. He explained that, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, South Asia was the richest region in the continent but it was made penurious in 1947 by the British through the Partition. For example, during the Mughal empire, it was the leader in the manufacturing sector, but the sub-continent's share in manufacture and industrial output declined enormously in recent times. To describe the process of impoverishment and destruction perpetrated by the British to the detriment of the South Asian economy and society, he quoted Shashi Tharoor's recent book, *An Era of Darkness*. He identified the colonial phase as the fundamental cause of conflict among the South Asian countries, emphasising that the Partition was "utterly fraud and unduly hurried, creating further separation among the people". Major General Banerjee said that, with 70 years having passed since the Partition, the time was now ripe to overcome the divisions in South Asia.

He then enumerated the main challenges facing the region today and identified possible fields for collaboration among the member states. South Asia was facing numerous strategic threats, emanating from both outside and within the region. The issue of terrorism and the ideation of effective counterterrorism measures had already created further divisions among the South Asian countries, and they remained far from finding a definitive solution. The current global strategic environment was not very favourable, being characterised by numerous conflicts, such as the South China Sea disputes, a potential nuclear engagement in northeast Asia and

terrorist attacks in Europe, just to mention a few. There were, however, some favourable trends concerning the SAARC region, such as limited border conflicts, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the One Belt One Road Initiative and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Also, the SAARC economies were doing fairly well at present.

Yet, according to Major General Banerjee, there were inherent limitations in the SAARC as an organisation. One of these was that it was not a supranational organisation, like what the EU had attempted to become. The SAARC should promote cooperation in fields which would be mutually beneficial for its member countries, such as trade and counter-terrorism. It was necessary to convert the organisation into a real 'people's movement' and produce new imaginative approaches to common issues, particularly in the field of security.

Major General Muniruzzaman analysed the issue of regionalism from the point of view of security, based on his long experience as a security analyst. According to him, the progress of regionalism in South Asia was strictly intertwined with its security situation and it was, therefore, impossible to fully understand this without assessing the region's security issues. In this regard, a number of fundamental points were highlighted.

The first issue was the Indo-centric nature of the security scene in South Asia. As a consequence, for the SAARC process to succeed, it was essential that India be comfortable with it. The organisation was born in a climate of suspicion from India and it had probably never overcome such suspicion.

The second issue was manifest in Indo-Pakistani relations. Such a conflictual relationship continued to permeate the whole SAARC process, while the other states had become absolutely irrelevant partners. It was essential to achieve a better level-playing field, where all states would have equal relevance.

A third obstacle was the asymmetric geographic setting of South Asia, with a gigantic India facing a few smaller countries. It was necessary to find ways to accommodate such an unequal distribution. From this point of view, Major General Muniruzzaman suggested that ASEAN might provide a good lesson for South Asia since it managed to solve the asymmetry between a much bigger Indonesia and smaller countries like Singapore and Brunei.

Fourth, the political engagements among some member countries of the SAARC could clearly create constraints which might jeopardise cooperation. This, according to Major General Muniruzzaman, had happened in the case of India's political engagement with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It was important, in fact, for the member states to feel comfortable in the region and be reassured of a positive working relationship among themselves. All the SAARC summits that were called off could be traced to the objection of a member country; sometimes, smaller member states had even been used as proxies to block the functioning of the organisation, like in the case of Bangladesh boycotting the summit in Islamabad, under pressure from India. Such practices should stop, as the SAARC should not be used as a platform to fulfil the narrow political/diplomatic agendas of specific nation states.

Major General Muniruzzaman observed that complex security relations existed among the countries in the region, not only between India and Pakistan. A major area of contention from the security point of view was the rise of terrorism, specifically the fact that some countries accused others of harbouring terrorists. He also remarked that South Asia was a largely *post-conflict* region (for example, Sri Lanka and Nepal), and should be addressed as such by taking into consideration the peculiarities of post-conflict societies. In addition to this, as a region of *protracted conflict*, a different approach to conflict resolution was also required. The fact of South Asia being one of the fastest growing regions, from the military point of view, provided a further obstacle to security. He opined that security goals should be addressed with a stronger focus on *human security*.

South Asia being one of the most nuclearised regions in the world, a 'regime' that might be able to contain militarisation and nuclearisation must be urgently set up to prevent South Asians from living in fear. Non-traditional security threats, too – for example, food- energy- and water-scarcity – made the prospects of a conflict very plausible. Drug-trafficking and climate change were additional destabilising factors. So was the tension between India and China, a 'superpower' making tremendous effort to find its way to the South Asian region. While most countries had agreed to support China's Belt and Road Initiative, India had expressed reservations. The region, as a whole, should find a common stance.

In order to make the SAARC an effective instrument, Major General Muniruzzaman recommended a total political – and not just diplomatic – commitment to the cause of regionalism; including security being part of the issues addressed through regional



cooperation, a review of the charter, empowerment of the secretariat and the secretary general, and instauration of dialogue with countries beyond the region, which were already observers.

Ambassador Mohamed Touhid Hossain opened his presentation with the question of whether South Asia, as a region, was better today, as compared to 1985 when it was born. According to him, the answer was 'no'. That the SAARC was meant to be unsuccessful was clear since its beginning as both India and Pakistan looked at it with suspicion.

He described the Partition, on the one hand, as a tragic event, which brought huge suffering to the subcontinent; and, on the other, as a strange provision, which adopted religion as its main criterion, while allowing princely states to choose their destiny disregarding the religious composition of their domains. Ambassador Hossain stated that the Kashmir issue, which was spawned by such events, could not be expected to end anytime soon. He asserted that the current SAARC deadlock was hard to solve, as it was unrealistic to expect Pakistan to step back from its position. As a consequence, as long as every state's consent was necessary to hold a meeting, no meeting would take place.

According to Ambassador Hossain, the India-Pakistan dispute, unlike the China-India one, was much more than a border issue and, as such, the SAARC was destined to remain dysfunctional for a long time.

Ambassador Hossain considered a possible future scenario without the SAARC. He envisaged that, if the SAARC were truly destined to have no future, BIMSTEC might become the leading organisation in the region, if the partners decided so. With BIMSTEC working on a less political ground, compared to the SAARC, this factor might allow the former to be less vulnerable to potential deadlocks. In this case, too, the main obstacle, manifest in the Bangladesh-Myanmar dispute over the Rakhine state, was now creating problems from the social, economic and security points of view for Bangladesh. The issue also reflected a complete disappointment with Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The dispute would end only if Myanmar's approach were to become more rational, and if India and the larger international community were to exert pressure on Myanmar so that a solution could be found.

The paper presented by Dr Dinusha Panditaratne provided an analysis of the regional strategic context from Sri Lanka's perspective. It examined the way Sri Lanka saw itself within the region, the country's potentials and the obstacles that the island-nation was currently facing in realising its aspirations.

Dr Dinusha Panditaratne asserted that the SAARC was rather absent from the debate on security developing in Sri Lanka. She also explained the evolution of the country's reputation and self-perception. Seen until some time ago as a 'good' South Asian country suffering from economic dependency on the West, Sri Lanka was now projecting a brand new identity for itself as i) the centre of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); ii) the centre between Dubai and Singapore; and iii) the economic gateway to the Indian subcontinent.

This re-envisioning endeavour was motivated by the political will for taking better advantage of Sri Lanka's geopolitical position, in light of current global economic trends. With the shift of economic power from the West to the East, and China and India competing for control over energy and trade flows moving across the region, the IOR has acquired new importance. At the same time, with traditional diplomacy declining, 'economic diplomacy' was now becoming the buzzword of the day. Dr Dinusha Panditaratne explained that, aware of these ongoing transformations and almost like a child moving out of the family, Sri Lanka, keeping in mind its roots, was now looking for a better future beyond the family's shores. In doing so, the country was facing various challenges, including regulatory and financial issues. Also, the framework for Sri Lanka's foreign policy had not been clearly defined yet.

A main challenge for the country was to reposition itself at the centre of the IOR, between India and China, bearing also in mind the continuing predominance of the United States. Based on recent polls, around 70 per cent of Sri Lankans agreed that China, not India, was now the key to the country's success, she pointed out.

Underscoring the importance of intellectual openness to build a friendly and cooperative neighbourhood, she welcomed the possibility of setting up an exchange programme, similar to the EU's Erasmus Mundus, in the South Asian region. She also suggested that, rather than instituting a regional university, it would be better to start cultivating young talents earlier. An institution similar to the United World College would allow the region to identify its finest students and raise them. With regard to cultural exchange and understanding, Dr

Dinusha Panditaratne considered that, while creating connectivity channels at the museum level might be harder, inspiration could be drawn from the Middle East, where well-funded Western and international cultural institutions opened a 'branch' in a host country to showcase another country's heritage. She said that when governments were not able to lead effectively, it was necessary to bring into the process the people and the private sector in particular which, in its role of a job-creator, would more adequately realise the economic potential of South Asia.

## **SAARC and Other Sub-Regional Initiatives**

Mr Shahid Javed Burki, Senior Visiting Research Fellow at ISAS and former Finance Minister of Pakistan, chaired the second session. The panel discussed "SAARC and Other Sub-Regional Initiatives" and featured Ms Gayathri Nanayakkara, Director of Communications at the Institute of National Security Studies, Sri Lanka; Ambassador Ghafoor Mohamed, former Permanent Representative of the Maldives to the United Nations; Dr Jivanta Schoettli, Visiting Research Fellow at ISAS; Dr Mallika Joseph, Head of the Department of National Security Studies at the Central University of Jammu, India; and Professor Indralal De Silva, Acting Executive Director of Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Sri Lanka.

While introducing the panellists, Mr Burki expressed reservations about the proliferation of sub-regional arrangements, maintaining that such entities, in the case of the SAARC, represented an actual opt-out. He instead reiterated the necessity for all South Asians to work together rather than further dividing themselves into smaller coalitions.

Ms Nanayakkara spoke about the current strategic environment in South Asia, the role of the SAARC and how sub-regional organisations could affect its functioning. Ms Nanayakkara observed that the security situation of the region, characterised by the risk of terrorist insurgency and the expansion of the Islamic State, rendered cooperation troublesome. BIMSTEC, however, managed to provide a more effective platform for regional integration than the SAARC, mainly because of the absence of Pakistan. This allowed India to engage more, without the risk of sabotage that eventually caused the SAARC to be caught in a

deadlock. Ms Nanayakkara envisaged that, considering that all South Asian countries were members of one or the other of these two organisations, BIMSTEC could actually represent a more viable option to regionalism, and it was not unlikely that the SAARC would lose ground as the organisation of reference.

Bilateral disputes between member countries were the main reason for the SAARC's failure. BIMSTEC was not immune to such disputes, either. As examples, Ms Nanayakkara mentioned the Rohingya crisis and the Thai-Myanmar border issue. She concluded that such obstacles were, however, not comparable to the Indo-Pakistani divide. As a consequence, compared to the SAARC, BIMSTEC provided India and its other members with a better planning option. Ms Nanayakkara noted that, as the SAARC had a broader spectrum to address common issues, the South Asian countries should strive to make the organisation effective, rather than building an alternative to it. If this was not done, the region would destabilise itself.

Mr Burki commented that the ongoing trend of excluding Pakistan from regional negotiation was worrisome, Pakistan being a relevant player in the region. The funds that it was now receiving from China for the creation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor would exemplify this well. As a result of this, Mr Burki warned that if the region were to persist with isolating Pakistan, it would have the sure effect of further pushing it into the Chinese orbit.

Ambassador Ghafoor started his presentation by describing South Asia as one of the fastest growing economies but also as the home of bilateral conflicts, nuclearisation, terrorist insurgencies and border conflicts caused by reciprocal mistrust among countries. Despite its commonalities, South Asia was divided by numerous differences. Talking about the SAARC's role, Ambassador Ghafoor said that it was indeed an example of resilience since it had not ceased to exist despite the difficulties it faced. Also, it had actually contributed, to a certain extent, to fostering mutual understanding within South Asia. One of the founding principles of the SAARC was that political and contentious issues should not affect the work of the organisation, which, paradoxically was what eventually happened.

With regard to sub-regional organisations, Ambassador Ghafoor noted that Article 7 of the SAARC Charter included a provision regarding such type of arrangements. This form of

cooperation was, therefore, seen as something not detrimental but subsidiary to the achievement of the SAARC's mission. Sub-regional entities, therefore, proliferated in South Asia. In many cases, however, such a form of cooperation, rather than being simply 'sub'-regional in scope, actually appeared to be 'extra'-regional, extending beyond the limits envisaged by the SAARC's mandate.

According to him, the main issue preventing the SAARC from being truly effective was the lack of genuine political will among the leaders of the member countries. In order to overcome such a hurdle, the organisation should be reformed. The secretariat could be critical in making a difference, taking initiatives and compelling the member states to enforce them. The appointment of the secretary general should not be based on a political decision but rather on meritocratic criteria. The secretary general should be recruited based on his/her abilities, and perhaps even on a contractual basis. Mr Burki commented that an independent secretariat would indeed be crucial for the organisation's effectiveness.

Dr Jivanta Schoettli offered a thematic presentation on the blue economy; with her presentation having four parts – the ocean economy, maritime South Asia, multi-level cooperation and a role for South Asia within global governance. First, she introduced the concept of the 'blue economy' as the whole of ocean-based industries (for example fishing and maritime biotechnology) plus natural assets and ecosystem services autonomously provided by the ocean itself (that is, fish, shipping lanes and CO<sub>2</sub> absorption). The estimated monetary value and employment produced by such an economy was estimated to be huge.

Dr Jivanta Schoettli then analysed the engagement and position of South Asian nations in this respect. She alluded to the fact of each of the five maritime nations among the SAARC members having a specific policy stance with regard to the 'blue economy'. Landlocked states – Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan – would have high stakes in obtaining the right to access and transit, she pointed out. The 'blue economy' was now providing new possibilities to the South Asian nations to leverage their position.

Dr Jivanta Schoettli noted that, to be effective, maritime cooperation might also need greater effort than land-related cooperation, since the level of synchronisation among the stakeholders must be considerable in order to make use of all the resources that this opportunity offered. Currently, there were various forms of bilateral cooperation in the field.

BIMSTEC, for example, provided a model of cooperation that would fit well with addressing the 'blue economy' opportunities. The Indian Ocean Rim Organization and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, instead, would hardly have a significant impact in this regard, with the former not including Pakistan, and the latter being extremely sector-specific. India seemed to have taken up a leading role within the IOR; projects like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All Region) and Sagarmala (focused on port development) exemplified New Delhi's stance. Given the huge contribution of the 'blue economy' to South Asia's economic potential, Dr Jivanta Schoettli concluded that there was now a categorical regional imperative to create the instruments necessary to regulate and take advantage of it.

Dr Mallika Joseph started her presentation on the possible future scenarios for contemporary societies, believing that, to help revitalise the SAARC, it was necessary first of all to think about how the future might be like, and determine whether the SAARC would fit in it. According to her, there was at present a need for the state to reinvent itself, as nationalism, religious extremism and populism were eroding multicultural and liberal identities. It also seemed unavoidable that the world would experience huge migratory movements of people, made inevitable by demographic growth. This would further increase the potentially high incidence of human trafficking, conflict over resources, polarisation of political narratives.

Based on such a scenario, she asserted that it was now extremely important to have organisations that could produce peace. While the huge impact that the social media was causing in our societies had fostered greater people-to-people contacts and rendered the political processes far more open, this form of media was also contributing to the spread of half-truths and jingoism, trends that would make the necessity for peace even more urgent.

Dr Mallika Joseph observed that, according to the school of thought of neo-institutionalism, international organisations would eventually be ineffective. She said that, in spite of neo-institutionalist pessimism, South Asia was more at peace now than 35 years ago.

Dr Mallika Joseph concluded by saying that, while international and regional organisations could play a vital role in promoting peace in the current era of globalisation, some precaution would be in order. In this regard, the most important lesson learnt from the SAARC saga was that isolating any of the relevant stakeholders –like India did with Pakistan – would be

detrimental to the cause. She also remarked that the youth could have a vital role in fostering mutual understanding.

Professor De Silva offered solutions to the SAARC deadlock based on an analysis of the economic situation and the demographic trends concerning the region. He explained that South Asia was going to experience a demographic boom in the future, as most countries in the region were already included in the group of 50 states expected to have their populations grow by more than one-third by 2025. The population of India, expected to grow the most, might reach 1.45 billion by 2025. Such a phenomenon would produce age-structure transitions – referred to as ‘demographic dividend’, deemed to be strongly impactful on economic growth. Such dividend, however, would not be a sufficient condition for the economy to prosper, as other factors like political stability and skills development would be equally necessary. The ‘skill gap is indeed’ particularly problematic for the subcontinent.

That the structure of the economies in the region did not so far make cooperation naturally easy was proved by the absolutely negligible growth in intra-regional trade in the last few decades. Professor De Silva traced the cause to the structural features of South Asian economies, such as the preponderance of regionalised markets, the dimension of informal trade and the low purchasing powers vis-à-vis India’s export capabilities.

In conclusion, Professor De Silva noted that the main reason why the SAARC countries were moving away from the SAARC was the noticeable lack of economic benefits so far, making it necessary, therefore, to create these benefits. As the member countries deeply differed from one another in terms of populations and levels of development, the SAARC had continued to embody the challenge of creating the so-called ‘unity within diversity’. In order to do so, it was essential now to minimise the negative impact of non-traditional security threats on the South Asian nations’ collective will and ability to cooperate with each other. Also, these countries should create a shared vision to guide such an endeavour, based on a common identity of South-Asianess. Professor De Silva also emphasised the need to promote people-to-people relations in order to catalyse the SAARC’s effectiveness.

Dr Chowdhury and Dr Pandey officially closed the workshop, declaring it an important effort and a first non-official step towards the renovation of the SAARC process, whose only way to be truly re-energised would be to become a ‘People’s SAARC’.

## **Memorandum of Understanding and Report Launch**

The event also witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between ISAS and CSAS. The two signatories were Professor Mitra and Dr Pandey.

The Report on ‘Countering Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism in South Asia’, a publication by KAS and COSATT, was also launched by Mr Echle, Major General Banerjee, Major General Muniruzzaman and Dr Chowdhury.

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