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SAARC at Twenty Five

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Abstract

The paper reviews the latest summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held at Bhutan during 28-29 April 2010. Reflecting in this context on twenty-five years of SAARC, the paper argues that despite disappointments, the enhanced commitment to regional cooperation displayed at the summit indicates movement in the right direction.

SAARC celebrated 25 years of existence at its 16th summit held on 28-29 April 2010 in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu. There are two ways in which the performance of this regional grouping can be evaluated. One is to compare it with similar organisations, like the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The second way is to compare it with the level of regional cooperation in South Asia before SAARC was established and see what the grouping has done to the region in terms of development and integration, and in terms of the promises made by regional leaders. In both the cases, SAARC's achievements fall below expectations and promise resulting in frustration among its well-wishers.

SAARC has certainly succeeded in identifying the potential of regional cooperation and preparing an intellectual foundation for harnessing this potential. In some critical areas,

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instrumentalities and structures of regional cooperation have also been established such as South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), SAARC Social Charter, Convention on Fighting Terrorism, a blueprint for poverty alleviation and the setting up of SAARC Developmental Goals (SDGs) on the lines of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. In recent years, regional institutions are also being put in place like the SAARC Development Fund, SAARC Food Bank and South Asian University. There has certainly been a rise in the regional identity and consciousness in South Asia through unofficial and semi-official organisations like the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), SAARC Lawyers, SAARC Youth Festival, South Asian Chambers of Commerce and Industries, SAARC TV programmes and above all, a peoples' SAARC that meets every year parallel to the annual SAARC summits. All these add to an impressive plethora of structures. However, in terms of their implementation and effect on the lives of South Asian people, record is far from being satisfactory. The poor performance on implementing the promises made and hopes aroused as well as the delivery of public goods have been lamented by the regional leaders year after year. The host of the 16th SAARC summit held in Bhutan, Prime Minister Jigmey Thinly said, 'Some 200 meetings take place every year among SAARC countries but these meetings are not matched by results.'² Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh urged his regional colleagues that, 'we should challenge ourselves by acknowledging that the glass of regional cooperation, regional development and regional integration is half empty... We have created institutions for regional cooperation but we have not yet empowered them adequately to enable them to be more pro-active.'³

Analysts have attributed several factors to this low performance of SAARC. Indo-Pakistan conflict and lack of initiative on India's part have been recounted as such factors umpteen times. The Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed setting aside diplomatic niceties at the Thimphu summit said, 'I hope that neighbours can find ways to compartmentalise pending differences while finding areas on which they can move forward. I am specifically referring to differences between India and Pakistan.'⁴ Bilateral differences have no doubt been a bane of SAARC's progress, and such differences are not confined to India and Pakistan alone. SAARC in its 25 years life has had only 16 annual summits so far. The gap in numbers is made up by the missed summits on account of bilateral differences and such differences have been between India and Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh, and Nepal and Bhutan. Besides bilateral differences, there have also been structural constraints inherent in the levels of development and structures of

² *Asian Tribune*, 30 April 2010, <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/04/30/analysis-opinion-president-nasheed%E2%80%A2>

³ Dr Manmohan Singh's opening speech at the SAARC Summit at Thimphu, 28 April 2010.

⁴ *Asian Tribune*, 30 April 2010, *op.cit.*

economies, complicated often by the complexities of internal politics in member countries. However, things are changing gradually. Now, there is a functioning multi-party democracy in all the South Asian countries, which was highlighted at the Thimphu summit. Economically, all the SAARC countries are on an upward growth trajectory. With Pakistan is feeling the pressure of terrorism internally and Sri Lanka having eliminated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorism militarily, there seems to be a greater realisation among all the SAARC members that the menace of terrorism cannot be overcome without the active cooperation of the neighbours. Forces of globalisation are pushing for regional integration all around the world and South Asia cannot escape that pressure. SAARC has expanded by the joining of new members like Afghanistan. There are another nine countries like the United States (US), China, Japan and EU joining as observers. Some of the observers like Myanmar and China are keen to become full-fledged members while others like Russia are in the queue to join as observer. This is an indication of enhanced global interest in the South Asian grouping.

SAARC has welcomed the role of observer countries with the Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa making a specific plea that SAARC should 'strengthen the means for practical engagement with SAARC observer states.' One hopes that the powerful and resourceful observer countries of SAARC like the US, China and Japan will induce greater developmental cooperation in South Asia rather than driving the region in different directions to serve their short-term strategic interests. It is interesting to note that the US and China have established a 'sub-dialogue' on South Asia.⁵ The US, more than anyone else, needs a greater India-Pakistan cooperation to serve its own policy imperatives in the fight against 'global terrorism'. The US observer, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake, therefore appeared to be more focused on the India-Pakistan bilateral meeting while generally welcoming the 'vision for greater South Asian regional cooperation'. China conveyed a strong message through its Vice Foreign Minister Wang Guangya at Thimphu that it was serious in its engagement with SAARC. Wang said, 'On the basis and in the spirit of equality and mutual benefit, China is ready to conduct dialogue and exchanges, and expand practical cooperation with SAARC.' He endorsed SAARC's concern about the challenge of climate change highlighted during the Thimphu summit and promised to cooperate on this issue 'through bilateral channels and within the framework of South-South cooperation.' Beijing has promised a contribution of US\$300,000 to the newly established SAARC Development Fund. This Chinese activism

⁵ M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'China Breaks the Himalayan Barrier', 30 April 2010, <http://asiatimes.com/atimes/South Asia/LEo1Dfo3.html>

at SAARC, while being welcomed in the other member countries, will surely come under sharper strategic scrutiny by policy makers and analysts in India.⁶

The push for cooperative bonding in South Asia, resulting both from intra-regional and global pressures, was clearly evident at the 16th SAARC summit in Bhutan. This was evident in the bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the summit where India and Pakistan pledged to carry forward their dialogue process. This could be seen as India's strategic move forward in strengthening Pakistan's democratic leadership notwithstanding its concerns for bringing the culprits of Mumbai terrorism to the book. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh may be called upon to answer many questions on the wisdom of this move not only to the opposition and the strategic community, but also many within his own party and coalition. India's bilateral meetings with Nepal and Sri Lanka were also significant. While it pleaded for the need of national consensus (that includes Maoists) in Nepal, it urged upon the Sri Lankan President to seek a lasting political resolution of the ethnic issue and expedite the resettlement of internally displaced Tamils. The SAARC members reiterated their commitment to cooperate in fighting terrorism and pushing further the regional cooperation so as to make it concrete and meaningful to the peoples of the region. A regional agreement for 'Trade in Services' was signed at Thimphu. The summit leaders also agreed to form a South Asia Forum of 'eminent persons' to "generate debate, discussion and the exchange of ideas on South Asia and its future development".

The imprint of the host country Bhutan on the outcome of the 16th summit was clearly evident in the special focus on environmental issues. The Thimphu SAARC declaration was termed as, 'Towards a Green and Happy South Asia'. A separate statement on climate change was also adopted. It is useful to note here that Bhutan has done most in the region in the field of reforestation and Bhutan's concept of development go beyond material prosperity to cover the environmental and spiritual aspects. It has developed a unique index of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as against the conventional Gross National Product (GNP) to measure development. By making climate change the theme of the Thimphu summit, the South Asian leaders agreed to coordinate their approaches in this respect, particularly at the upcoming climate conference in Mexico in December 2010. They have also called upon developed countries to extend financial resources and transfer technologies to help the developing world meet the challenges of climate change. All the member countries also agreed to plant 10 million trees over the coming five years. They have also established an 'Inter-Governmental Group' on climate change to monitor regional policy in this area. The SAARC secretariat was asked to get a study prepared to facilitate the accreditation of SAARC with the Kyoto Protocol's Adaptation Fund.

⁶ See, Bhadrakumar, *ibid.* Also, Ravni Thakur, 'Observer as absorber', *The Hindustan Times*, 29 April 2010.

Though nothing dramatic came out of the Thimphu SAARC summit, the reiteration of regional cooperation with an enhanced sense of commitment reinforces the hope that SAARC is moving in the right direction, slowly but steadily.

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