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SAARC in Shambles? The Future of Regional Cooperation in South Asia

India-Pakistan relations seem to have reached their nadir. But war is not an option for either, as its destructive potentials are immense. The impact of the situation on the regional organization, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is great. But the body must not be dissolved, and must be made immune from the periodic tensions that bedevil the States of the region. SAARC should be seen as belonging more to the peoples of the region than to governments, as indeed is the case.

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Introduction

South Asian regional cooperation, at least as envisaged via its regional organization SAARC, is currently in shambles. SAARC was scheduled to hold its summit in Pakistan next November. This is now not happening. India has already conveyed to the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu its reluctance to attend. The stated reason was: "...increasing cross-border terrorist attacks in the region and growing interference in the internal affairs of Member States by one country have created an environment that is not conducive to the successful holding of the 19th Summit in Islamabad in November 2016". But so as not to drive the final nail in the coffin of

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the idea of collaboration within South Asia, the benefits of which like motherhood, are incontestable, the Indian position was carefully crafted to include the remarks: “India remains steadfast in its commitment to regional cooperation, connectivity and contacts but believes that these can only go forward in an atmosphere free of terror”.

India’s negative sentiments flowed from a number of recent cross-border incidents, particularly the one in Uri in Kashmir. Four insurgents, allegedly either from across the border or encouraged by Pakistan, came upon an Indian Army camp and killed eighteen soldiers. They died themselves, but after having inflicted a severe damage to the target. There will, as indeed there should, be serious investigation as to how a military installation, so close to the Line of Control between two States that are eyeball to eye ball, in Kashmir which was experiencing a political conflagration of a very high magnitude, could prove to be so vulnerable. One of the oldest rules in tactical confrontation is that unpreparedness invites attack. Whether this was indeed the case would need looking into. Fingers were immediately pointed towards Pakistan, or at any rate towards *Jaish-e-Muhammed*, a terrorist-prone Pakistani non-state actor that India claims Pakistan does not do enough to rein in, and indeed use at times as a convenient proxy. Pakistan, as it is wont to do routinely on such occasions, denied any involvement. Mutual verbal assaults went into high gear. The locale of conflict, for a time, was shifted to another venue where an actual crossing of military swords was unlikely: the United Nations in Manhattan. Heated words were exchanged between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj of India. As an obvious slight in a shared culture which places great store by protocol and seniority, the immediate ‘right of reply’ to the Pakistani Prime Minister’s statement was exercised by a very junior Indian official.

The Current Indo-Pak Situation

So, the situation was most unpropitious for the kind of bonhomie a SAARC event would be required to inspire to be successful. In that context the Indian letter to the SAARC Secretariat was quite understandable. Better to declare unwillingness to ‘jaw-jaw’, than to actually engage in war-war. The Indian disinclination to attend would in itself be sufficient grounds for the postponement or the cancellation of the Summit. But Pakistan continued to receive flak from other capitals where its stock is low. Dhaka, for instance. The State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh stated to the media that his country would not take part in the Summit because of the “repeated interference of one country in its internal affairs”. This was an oblique

reference to Pakistan which had publicly opposed war crimes trials that had taken place in Bangladesh and to which the Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was committed in its election pledges. But he added that being a founder member (indeed Bangladesh was the originator of the idea of SAARC) it was “committed to the forum”, mentioning “the promotion of connectivity and regional cooperation”, concepts that formed part of a common platform with India. He added that the decision to pull out was Bangladesh’s own.

Afghanistan and Bhutan also lent themselves to supporting the boycott. Both cited the “increase of terrorism in the region” laying the blame for it on Pakistan’s doorsteps. Kabul stated that this fact would keep President Ashraf Ghani busy since he was also the Commander in Chief. Thimpu also shared the concern, and gave the deterioration of peace and security due to the increase of terrorism as the reason for its withdrawal. Nepal, which had the unenviable task of taking a decision in this regard, somewhat cautiously, “took the development seriously” and “strongly urged that a conducive environment be created (for the Summit) soon by ensuring the participation of *all* member states in line with the spirit of the SAARC Charter”. Those words are, at least for now, likely to fall on deaf ears, and the prospects of the Islamabad Summit have most certainly come a cropper. The proposed Summit had achieved something even without taking place. By the very fact of its postponement or cancellation, it may have helped avert a major war. The tool of diplomacy was able to keep the weapons of the military apart.

Skirmishes at levels lower than battle have occurred. India has claimed several ‘surgical strikes’ at terrorist sites. Pakistan has denied that these have taken place, but admitted to two military casualties as the result of an Indian offensive. The fact that the Indian action was nowhere like the ‘entire jaw for a tooth’ demand of disproportionate retribution that an irate Indian leader had made, and Pakistan’s denial reflecting unwillingness for a full scale military response, does reflect a modicum of restraint on both sides. It has been said, and with much truth, that when those who do the fighting have the right to choose between war and peace, history would no longer be written in blood. An India-Pakistan war today would not just be a clash of uniformed personnel. Entire cities would be laid bare in ruins. Tens of millions on both sides would be decimated. Too heavy a price to pay to satisfy the jingoistic predilections and macho whims of a few armchair warriors!

The Military Balance

India and Pakistan possess huge conventional military assets. India has 1.32 million personnel in active service, 6464 tanks, 2086 aircraft of all types, 295 vessels, 2 aircraft carriers and 14 submarines. Pakistan, on the other hand, commands a force strength of 620000, 2924 tanks, 923 aircraft of all types, 197 vessels, no aircraft carrier and 5 submarines. In sheer numbers, these would be two among the world's mightiest forces pitted against one another. India's superiority in this respect is quite clear. But, despite this, what lends symmetry to the balance is the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides: 100 to 120 warheads for India, and 110 to 130 warheads for Pakistan. Since Pakistan's nuclear deterrence is focussed on India only, Pakistan has not developed systems with a range greater than 3000 km. Instead it has chosen to opt for short range, small yield ordnances, called 'battlefield' or 'tactical nuclear weapons' (TNW). Since India has China on the radar as well, it has invested on long range category. Also unlike Pakistani, Indian civilian political masters would be chary of leaving major decision-making with regard to the use of nuclear weapons to field commanders, which the use of TNWs would necessarily imply. A nuclear war would impact immensely on India's growth trajectory. Hence its penchant for pushing the nuclear threshold higher, while Pakistan sees it in its interest to push its nuclear threshold down through the threat of employing TNWs to deter India from using its conventional superiority.

The Pakistan Foreign Secretary stated in October last year that "Our nuclear programme is one-dimensional: stopping Indian aggression before it happens. It is not for starting a war. It is for deterrence". The Pakistani statement is meant to be directed at India's so-called 'Cold-start doctrine', involving conducting military operations after seizing some Pakistani territory in a swift action. That would be much like the 'trip-wire' effect that North Atlantic Treaty Organization purported to respond to the Warsaw Pact's conventional superiority in Europe during the Cold War. The 'red line' in the Pakistani nuclear doctrine is unclear, because being conventionally weaker, the ambiguity would be seen as enhancing deterrence. Because TNWs are supposedly more precise and cause less collateral damage, the propensity to use may be greater. This might engender an escalatory conflict and encourage the thinking that a 'nuclear war-fighting' is feasible. A theory of this type evolved in the US in the mid-1970s known as the 'Schlesinger doctrine', with reason considered dangerous by some analysts. If Pakistan were to use TNW in a minimal strike at an Indian target, say moving within Pakistan, India would have to consider if it would respond with its strategic weapon which would involve

massive destruction. Almost immediately, in this scenario, Pakistan could unleash a total nuclear devastation. The result for both sides would be too horrendous to contemplate. Prudence should dictate other means of displaying valour.

‘Strategic Restraint’ is thus the result less of an option that many imagine. Small scale ‘hot pursuits’ may have taken place, such as the Indian claims of ‘surgical strikes’ against some terrorist camp on the Pakistani side of the LOC. Pakistan has denied such actions, but have stated exchange of fire had resulted in two Pakistani casualties. India is probably careful not to up the ante too much in terms of what might be perceived as a ‘humiliation’ for Pakistan, if war is to be avoided, and yet be seen to have retaliated in a way for the government to take maximum political mileage which it did. Exchanges of fire continue, there has been an additional Indian military casualty, and the Pakistanis have captured an Indian soldier. This person will need to be returned and so some diplomacy might precede that, leaving ajar a very small window of reconciliation of some kind. This would also provide an opportunity for the good offices of any third party negotiator, such as the United Nations to get involved and thereafter expand the negotiations to cover a broader framework.

The Punjab police, on the Indian side, announced that they had taken a pigeon flying in from Pakistan into custody. This pigeon was not definitely seen as a symbol of peace by the Indian side. They had allegedly discovered a threatening note to Prime Minister Modi that the bird was carrying, apparently signed by the ‘Lashkar-e-Taiba’, another terrorist group. Matters could thus get out of hand. Sadly, however, this is ‘lame-duck season’ for the UN Secretary General (in any case, his record of peace-making is far less than brilliant), and global leadership is currently weak. So the responsibility to initiate talks might devolve on the two protagonists themselves. Could other South Asian States lend a helping hand? Individually, or collectively?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi obviously does not want to go to war. It would destroy his plans for boosting India’s economy. It would severely threaten his own State Gujrat which could be targeted in any nuclear exchange. In any case, he would not like to share any responsibility for a possible Armageddon. Yet he must be seen to ‘punish’ Pakistan. The ‘surgical strikes’ seemed a good idea, but Pakistan’s vociferous denial that they took place queered the pitch somewhat. So he mooted a review of the Indus water treaty signed between Jawaharlal Nehru and President Ayub Khan in 1960 that controls water sharing in that basin between India and Pakistan. So far the treaty has been a ‘holy cow’, untouched even by the wars between the two sides. The very thought that it might be reviewed sent a shiver down Pakistani spine. But there

are risks. India is an upper riparian country, as is China on the Brahmaputra. So China could do unto India, what India might do unto Pakistan. Also, there was the case of Bangladesh. It was a lower riparian on the Ganges, still awaiting a settlement on the Teesta water distribution with India. Bangladeshi public opinion could be rattled by any unsavoury upper riparian behaviour. Strategic symmetry between India and Pakistan narrowed the range of options for Modi.

The Impact on SAARC

A diplomatic isolation of Pakistan was possible. So that was on the cards. Sub-regional arrangements without Pakistan was an answer. One was the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) can be made more active. It comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The other is the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Cooperation, also known simply as BCIM, aiming at greater economic integration between the four countries. But for India this could be a Pyrrhic victory. India can elbow out Pakistan, true, but it would also run the risk of China muscling itself in. China is focussed on all these countries and its network of ‘Belt and Road’ and such corridors could be used to link them to China. In the absence of Pakistan from the scene, the smaller South Asians may find Indian pre-eminence too overwhelming, and could welcome a greater Chinese imprint to offset any such development. If that were to happen, for New Delhi, it would be like jumping from ‘frying pan into fire’.

Few South Asians, if any, see the benefit of burying SAARC forever. For instance, it has been Bangladesh’s one major contribution to South Asian politics. The people of Bangladesh, despite the well-known political dichotomy between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, take a modicum of pride in what many see as the fruition of a bipartisan aspiration, one dedicated to peace and development. As far back as 6 February 1972 Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the AL, and indeed the whole of Bangladesh into achieving its liberation, at a banquet in his honour given by India’s Indira Gandhi had called for cooperation among South Asian nations. Otherwise, he warned, “history would not forgive us”. President Ziaur Rahman sent out letters in 1980 to all South Asian leaders laying out an initial set of proposals. The central thrust was a ‘neo-functionalist’ one in the jargon of international relations: the purpose was to build cooperation across a broad spectrum of activities, beginning with innocuous ones, so that tensions at more central levels could be

diffused. The drafters of the concept drew heavily on gurus like Ernst Haas and David Mitrany. Initially India and Pakistan were both opposed: Pakistan, because it feared the process was 'India-driven', and India, because it apprehended a 'clubbing of the smaller fellows'. Eventually Bangladeshi diplomacy succeeded in overcoming the impediments, and SAARC was born in 1985.

But the nature of South Asian politics necessitated two principles to be written into the SAARC Charter; one was that no contentious issues were to be discussed, which pretty much ruled out all key subjects; the other was all decisions were to be taken by consensus, which, given the Indo-Pak rivalry, exacerbated by the entry of Afghanistan, rendered any agreement a stupendously difficult exercise. Hence the impediment to 'forward movement' was structural, and small wonder progress on all fronts was minimal. SAARC could not go beyond what its member-states wished. Hence the unenviable conclusion by all concerned that South Asia is the world's least integrated region. However, one must also consider the possibility that the member states of SAARC might want to keep it that way.

Conclusion

That being so, it would be unwise to bring about the demise of SAARC even if there are periods of severe strain in intramural relationship in the region. SAARC is an organization whose ownership belongs to the peoples rather than to the governments. The Sikh pilgrim to the *gurdwaras* of Lahore would vouchsafe for that. If SAARC leaders, politicians or generals cannot meet for 'reasons of State', there is no reason why their writers, artists and thinkers should not. SAARC's achievements in politics or economics might not come anywhere close to that of the European Union or even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, but it has given the South Asian a sense of identity, both in the region, and increasingly so among its diaspora abroad. Given the nature of State-formation in South Asia, there will always be the problem of the adjustment as to the stressing of commonalities vis-a-vis the underscoring of distinctiveness. The commonality enables the people to share an ethos, and the distinctiveness justifies separate sovereignties. Both for India and Pakistan, the inability of a group of nations or sub-nations in the region to hold together could have far-reaching ramifications. Dr Manmohan Singh once had the dream of having breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul. Such a possibility may right now appear to lie well beyond the rim of the

saucer. Nonetheless, as the English poet Robert Browning, much read and admired in South Asia as well, said: “Man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what are the heavens for?”

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