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INTERSTATE CONFLICTS AND REGIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Zahid Shahab AHMED* - Stuti BHATNAGAR**

Abstract

Regional cooperation offers several benefits, for instance greater economic integration, frequent and easier people-to-people contact, sustainable peace and development at the regional level. Regional cooperation in South Asia, initiated under the platform of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985, has however been faced with numerous challenges. One of the greatest barriers for the SAARC has been recurring inter-state conflicts between member states, which have posed significant challenges, as the mandate of the SAARC excludes discussion on bilateral issues. This paper is an attempt to bring to light the debilitating effect of inter-state conflicts in South Asia on regional cooperation. Analyses has focused primarily on the negative association of interstate conflict and regionalism in South Asia, however this paper also discusses how other regional cooperation mechanisms in Europe and South East Asia have coped with such challenges to promote a vibrant regional identity. The paper also offers some solutions in the form of recommendations, so to speedup the process of regionalism in South Asia.

Key Words

Regional Cooperation, Interstate Conflict, South Asia.

Introduction

Today, peace means the ascent from simple coexistence to cooperation and common creativity among countries and nations.

Mikhail Gorbachev

Richness in material and human resources has warranted a constant interaction between countries in South Asia and the outside world. South Asian states have also been aware of their geopolitical advantages and the

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need to integrate into a regional force. Efforts were made early¹ to create institutional mechanisms for regional integration to enable the fostering of a common regional identity and a cooperative growth strategy making optimum use of inter-regional trade and social and political development. A culmination of such an understanding was the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Created in 1985, SAARC follows the principles of: focus on social and economic matters; decisions by consensus; and non-discussion on contentious bilateral issues. According to the SAARC Charter (1985) member states are 'desirous of peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and Non-Alignment, particularly respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all disputes'. This charter was signed by heads of states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, in 1985 in Dhaka. Over the years, SAARC has attempted to address several regional concerns, for instance drug and human trafficking, economic cooperation among south Asian states and the forging of a south Asian social identity and most recently efforts have been made to tackle the menace of terrorism in the region.

Despite its stated intentions SAARC as a regional body has for years grappled with inter-state, intra-state and regional conflicts. Since its existence in 1985, SAARC has been criticized for its failure to forge an effective regional identity. Inter-state conflicts and the bilateral interests of member states have a decisive influence on the achievements of SAARC; the regional body has also been influenced by external players and other regional organizations.

In an interdependent and swiftly globalizing world, it would be unrealistic to believe that SAARC can prosper in isolation. South Asian integration efforts are often influenced either directly or indirectly by great power politics and alliances in other regions. It has now become necessary for SAARC to rise above bilateral conflicts and to foster closer relationships with other regional and international organizations, in order to evolve into an effective regional organization.

¹ The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia first emerged in November 1980. After several consultations, the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries met for the first time in Sri Lanka in April 1981.

SAARC: An Overview

Since its inception in 1985, SAARC has become a forum for addressing a wide variety of issues pertinent to the region. Member states meet at annual summits, while foreign ministers are supposed to meet at least twice annually. The SAARC secretariat is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. In the past 23 years there have been 15 annual summits and 31 sessions of the Council of Ministers.²

Over the years, SAARC's agenda has expanded considerably, exhibiting the intent and capability to work collectively on issues of agriculture and rural development; health and population; women, youth and children; environment and forestry; human resource development information and communications technology; biotechnology and energy amongst others.

The SAARC forum has made significant attempts towards economic cooperation and social cohesion. With the overall aim of economic integration, the SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry was set up in 1992 to promote regional cooperation in the areas of trade and economic relations. A breakthrough came with the SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) Agreement which was signed in April 1993 and entered into force in December 1995; opening the way for a certain expansion of intra-SAARC trade. At the January 2004 summit meeting, the SAARC countries' foreign ministers signed the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement.

Ratified and entered into force in January 2006, the objectives of SAFTA include; elimination of all sorts of barriers in trade and facilitation of free and fair movement of products; promoting fair competition and free trade environment in respect of the existing economic conditions which will ensure the maximum benefit and; and establish an institutional frame to promote and expansion of regional cooperation.

One of the key highlights of SAFTA is the compensation for revenue losses for smaller regional economies (Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives) in the event of tariff reductions. By the end of first two years of SAFTA's implementation, 2006-07, the developing countries in South Asia that is, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, were demanded to bring their duties

² The Council of Ministers is comprised of the Foreign Ministers of member states. The council is responsible for formulating policies, reviewing progress, deciding on new areas of cooperation, establishing additional mechanisms as deemed important and also in making decisions on other important matters of general interest for the SAARC. The council meets twice a year and may also meet in an extraordinary session by agreement of member states.

down to 20 percent. In the final five year phase ending in 2012, the 20 percent duty will be reduced to zero in a series of annual cuts. And on the other hand, the least developing country group in South Asia consisting of Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives, get an additional three year to reach zero duty, they have time till 2017.

Apart from its goal of economic integration, a significant focus of the SAARC is social cohesion among member countries so as to promote a vibrant South Asian identity. The SAARC social charter was signed in Islamabad in 2004, in order to address such issues as population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and the protection of children, all of which are key issues for the welfare and well being of South Asian populations.³ Some other initiatives taken by the SAARC include:

1. SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987).
2. Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians (1992).
3. SAARCLAW: An association for persons from the legal communities of the SAARC countries (1992).
4. SAARC Convention on Prevention and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002).
5. The Additional Protocol on Suppression of Terrorism (2004)
6. SAARC Scheme for Promotion of Organized Tourism: The scheme was initiated with the over-all objective of people-to-people contact in the region and more specifically as a step to facilitate development of intra-regional tourism.
7. SAARC Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships Scheme: This initiative intends to provide cross-fertilization of ideas through greater interaction among students, scholars and academics.
8. SAARC Youth Volunteers Program (SYVOP): The main objective of the SYVOP is to harness the idealism of youth for regional cooperation programs by enabling them to work in other countries in the field of agriculture and forestry extension work.

³ A. Bailes, John Gooneratne, Mavara Inayat, Jamshed Ayaz Khan and Swaran Singh (2007). 'Regionalism and Security building', *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 15, 2007 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden.

Furthering SAARC objectives, in the 14th SAARC Summit held in New Delhi in April 2007, member states agreed to launch the SAARC Development Fund, establish the South Asian University, create a SAARC Food Bank and set up the SAARC Arbitration Council. In a significant move, Afghanistan was formally invited to take its place in the comity of SAARC and the People's Republic of China, European Union, Republic of Korea and the United States of America - nations crucial to regional cooperation - were invited as observers to enrich the agenda of SAARC with their inputs and experience. There are suggestions to include China and Iran as SAARC member states, so to make it more effective. In March 2007, Iran had formally requested for a grant for observer status in the SAARC.

Conflicts in South Asia – Challenges to Regionalism

'Regionalism' has a different meaning and purpose for each nation when they become a part of any regional organization. In most cases states that join hands in any regional cooperation mechanism have certain basic differences; for most regional cooperation is limited only to economic cooperation through free-trade agreements. Differences among member-states of the regional cooperation organizations are greater in the presence of inter-state conflict(s) between the member states. Even if states seem to agree on some issues at the platform of that particular regional cooperation organization, their intentions behind the concept and purpose of regionalism are fundamentally different. Inter-state conflicts have posed hurdles to regionalism. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the functioning of the SAARC.⁴

Established with a vision to forge a South Asian identity, SAARC has been unable to fulfill this promise and has often been criticized for its failures and shortcomings. Some constraining factors that can be identified in the SAARC framework are: its inability to tackle inter-state conflicts that has often made it hostage to bilateral conflicts and the nationalistic interests of member states. Apart from this, an Indo-centric strategic perception exists both among India's neighbors as well as among the big players in global diplomacy. Lack of trust among South Asian elites: SAARC was born with disabilities and constraints, which were essentially self-imposed. It adopted a functional approach of cooperation in non-controversial areas like social and cultural fields, hoping that if successfully carried forward, opportunities for

⁴ *ibid.*

cooperation in more vital areas could open up. Moreover, SAARC follows the principles that all decisions have to be made unanimously and that no bilateral and contentious issue can be on the SAARC agenda. This clearly exhibits a weaker inter-state relationship toward equitable participation in policy making for South Asian people.⁵

The lack of trust among member states has often manifested itself in the ineffective administration of several of the initiatives taken by the SAARC. A prime example is that of the SAFTA. Though the seven signatory nations of SAFTA implemented the first tariff reduction from July 1, 2006, Pakistan and India have not yet allowed each other to be facilitated under this agreement. In July 2006, India called for an urgent meeting of SAFTA Ministerial Council (this council comprises of Commerce/trade ministers of the SAARC countries and is responsible for the administration and implementation of the SAFTA agreement). Under the SAFTA agreement, the 'free trade area' operates on the basis of the 'sensitive list'. In this emergency meeting, India accused Pakistan of backing away from its commitment under the multilateral SAFTA agreement. However, this is not the only example of the two countries adopting confrontational postures towards each other at the SAARC platform. There have been several such occasions with both countries debating contentious issues and delaying the actual implementation of very important regional instruments for peace and economic integration.

Apart from the continuing India-Pakistan conflict, a concern that has often come up at SAARC forums is the dominant position of bigger states, particularly India, in the regional set-up. The discrepancy of size and power between India, a nation of over 1 billion people, and all its neighbors, leads to natural concerns among the latter about India's dominance in the region and potential interference in their affairs. At different times this has been a significant strand in the policy thinking of states such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and has led them to seek security assistance first and foremost from outside South Asia when they need it.⁶ Cooperative policies of SAARC are influenced by the fear among some of the smaller states around India that interdependence will lead to the erosion of their political autonomies and therefore undermine their advantages for securing 'honorable' settlement of bilateral disputes with India.⁷

⁵ Atiur, Rahman, 'SAARC: Not Yet a Community', *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, ed. Jim Rolfe. Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, 2004.

⁶ A. Bailes, *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*

⁷ Smruti Pattanaik, S. 'Making sense of regional cooperation: SAARC at twenty', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 1., 2006, Institute for Defence Studies Analysis, New Delhi.

This can be witnessed by the motivations of several member states in becoming a part of this regional body. Nepal joined SAARC hoping that this platform will provide it with opportunities to voice its most important concerns, most of which are related to India. Also Nepal wanted multilateral cooperation rather than a bilateral arrangement with India, especially in water-related conflicts. At the time of conception of SAARC, Bangladesh had serious concerns over the issue of sharing Ganges water with India, therefore Bangladeshi leadership of that time hoped to seek solutions of Ganges water and similar issues through the SAARC platform. Sri Lanka was initially hesitant to join SAARC, considering its greater and favorable economic ties with South East Asian nations. However, Sri Lanka's internal conflict compelled her to join SAARC with the hope of getting help from SAARC towards alleviating its fears from India.

Pakistan joined SAARC to further strengthen its ties with other South Asian states, which would, in the long run, help to counter India's influence in the region.

Types of conflict between the member states of SAARC

Territorial conflicts

SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	Deadlock on issues of Siachen glacier, Kargil and Sir Creek. Kashmir dispute which has resulted in two major wars
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Durand line issue

Cross-border terrorism

SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	On several occasions there have been blames from both sides (India and Pakistan) on each other for carrying out terrorist activities or supporting such acts in their country.

Conflict over natural resources

SAARC members	Conflict
India-Pakistan	Both countries are having dialogue regarding the Baglihar dam being built over River Chenab in Indian-administered Kashmir.
India-Bangladesh	Bangladesh wants a fair share of Ganga river by opposing the construction of Farrakha Barrage in India

Conflict(s)-related to immigrants and refugees

SAARC members	Conflict
India-Bangladesh	Illegal immigration of Bengalis into India.
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Pakistan has decided to shut down refugee camps under increasing pressure to crack down on cross-border militancy.
Nepal-Bhutan	Over repatriation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

Increasing military modernization in SAARC member states could be seen as one of the indicators to assess the seriousness of commitments of SAARC member states towards an efficient regional cooperation mechanism in South Asia. Constant rise in military expenditures shows an unhealthy environment for human development and also for the peaceful interstate relationships; as even on the platform of SAARC the member states have manifested lack of trust in countries with which they have a dispute or conflict. Increasing defense spending will not only aggravate the countries' internal and external disputes, but also exacerbate human security in the region and increase poverty.⁸ According to statistics from the International Institute of Strategic Studies,⁹ the defense expenditure of five of the South Asian states is as follows:

⁸ Gobind Thukral, 'Increased military spending keeps South Asia on the boil', *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, October 2007.

⁹ IISS, *The Military Balance 2007*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2007.

1. India - US\$21.7 billion
2. Pakistan - US\$ 4.14 billion
3. Bangladesh - US\$840 million
4. Sri Lanka - US\$686 million
5. Nepal - US\$ 139 million

The continuing conflict between India and Pakistan has also led to ever-increasing investments in arms and ammunitions to counter each other's military capability. Both states continue to invest huge amounts of their financial resources in buying weapons from the USA, China, Russia, Sweden and France.

SAARC and Conflict Resolution

While, there has not been a single direct attempt from SAARC to deal with any of the above mentioned disputes, there have been bilateral dialogues between the SAARC member states to soften their contentions. There is an ongoing series of dialogues between India and Pakistan; and most recently, Pakistan and Afghanistan organized Peace Jirgas to resolve their tensions through this traditional conflict resolution mechanism. During Musharraf's regime, Pakistan recommended the creation of a conflict resolution mechanism in SAARC to deal with all intra-regional bilateral conflicts.

Globalization has also been influential in South Asia, especially in terms of its impact on intra-regional politics and economics. On some occasions there has been pressure on South Asian states to show seriousness towards exploring possibilities for cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In this regard, there have been efforts from the USA to ease tensions between India and Pakistan, and Norwegian mediation between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Dispute resolution has recently found a place in the SAARC framework. At the 2005 SAARC summit in Dhaka, the member states agreed to establish a SAARC Arbitration Council in Pakistan. The council is aimed at creating favorable conditions for supporting greater investment by investors of one member state in the territory of another member state. This initiative is geared

towards creating a South Asian forum for settlement of commercial disputes by conciliation and arbitration. However, SAARC is yet to take serious steps to fully tackle the issue of inter-state conflicts between its member states.

Prevalence of several inter-state conflicts in South Asia is not because the stakeholders in conflicts are not highly motivated towards a productive peace-building process; involving bilateral dialogues, third-party mediations, back channels, track II diplomacy etc. The involvement of South Asian states in peace-building initiatives is evident in its long-term participation in the UN Peacekeeping Operations. At present, four of the world's top four UN peacekeepers are from South Asia; Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and India.¹⁰ It is ironical, therefore, that the same global peacekeepers continue to put deadlocks in several conflict resolution processes within their own region.

According to some analysts, South Asian regional stability has been troubled by the absence of an institutionalized security mechanism. Although SAARC did not develop as a bilateral conflict resolution mechanism, it has dealt with a few contentious issues such as terrorism and human trafficking. The Declaration prepared as an outcome of the SAARC summit of 2004, held in Islamabad, stated the commitment of member nations 'to the objectives of and principles of SAARC and pledge to reinvigorate cooperation of all peoples of South Asia'. Member states added that, 'We envision South Asia to be a peaceful and stable region where each nation is at peace with itself and its neighbors through peaceful means and dialogue'. In this declaration, the importance of peaceful resolution of conflicts was highlighted, but the outcome has not been very positive in either forcing member states to engage in any dialogue towards resolving their inter-state conflicts or SAARC becoming a platform for these important issues

For a country or an organization to act as a facilitator in a regional setting to resolving bilateral conflicts it has to be accepted as a neutral player. In the case of South Asia, due to its socio-cultural linkages and political history, it is difficult to consider any country as neutral.¹¹ India, considering its economic strength and geographical advantage, could play the role of a facilitator in resolving intra-regional conflicts. But that is not possible because India is a party to many inter-state South Asian conflicts. Second, the option could be taking benefit from the SAARC observers (EU, USA,

¹⁰ Four South Asian countries are at the top of the list as of United Nations report of October 2007 on ranking of military and police contributions to UN Operations; Pakistan with 10603, Bangladesh with 9717, India with 9316 and Nepal with 3674 members (UN, 2007).

¹¹ Pattanaik, *Strategic Analysis*, 2006

China, South Korea, Japan and Iran)¹² towards resolving bilateral conflicts in South Asia, but even among the observers there are ongoing tensions, for instance the troubled relations between the USA, Iran and China. To rely on the ineffective conflict resolution mechanism of the United Nations would also be a frustrating exercise.

Apart from the conflicts between member states, there is also disagreement among them on the need for a South Asian conflict resolution mechanism to deal with bilateral disputes. India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are not in favor of conflict resolution as a domain of the SAARC. However, the SAARC has shown potential for emerging as a forum for dialogue, negotiation, preventive diplomacy and confidence and peace building.

The South Asian community 'personality' broadly depends on three inter-linked economic and political factors: First, the character of economic transactions such as formal and informal trade relationships and whether there has been an honest attempt at reducing trade imbalances; second, how leaders feel about the outstanding regional problems, especially bilateral ones, such as the Indo-Pakistan conflict, India-Bangladesh border disputes, and those leaders' efforts to minimize these tensions; and third, the level of consciousness among citizens of the region toward the status of human rights in the region, and specifically, how they feel about states which at times, instead of promoting freedoms, curb them.¹³

The failure of the region to run regular flights between the South Asian capitals speaks volumes about the supremacy of 'mindless' politics over people's concerns. Only recently, a decision has been made by the concerned authorities in India and Pakistan to increase the number of flights and routes between their countries. At the moment, only one airline from each country operates between the Pakistani cities of Lahore and Karachi and the Indian cities of Mumbai and New Delhi.¹⁴ For the last three years bus and train services have reopened along some of the old railway lines and roads between India and Pakistan. However, even in the presence of relatively high inclination in friendly relationships between India and Pakistan, the latter refused to extend transit facility to India for trade with Afghanistan. A lot of brainstorming has been done on 'peace pipelines' between the concerned

¹² Observer status allows these countries to participate in the meetings, shape its thinking through their interactions, but not be part of decision-making in SAARC.

¹³ Rahman, *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, 2004

¹⁴ In February 2008, the aviation officials from India and Pakistan agreed to add India's Chennai and the Pakistani capital Islamabad as future destinations between both countries.

states to deal with the expected energy crises in South Asia. There are two proposals on peace pipelines: Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Iran-Pakistan-India. Both these projects are yet to be finalized.

Societal desires for substantive cooperation in the fields of developing natural resources, human resource and infrastructure remain inconsiderable. Specific areas of cooperation in the field of natural gas, water resources, ports and waterways, transportation, communications and hydropower remain to be explored. Vast areas of the service sectors of human development opportunities utilizing regional human and development infrastructures have remained out of focus. The present low level of intra-regional trade is a result of bad policy. Kashmir and other border conflicts have been used as instruments for the deprivation of the people of India and Pakistan from economic and social opportunities by some influential policy makers. The leaders have not been trying earnestly to reduce intimidation and state-sponsored violence against people of the related regions. What South Asians face today is a deep absence of pro-people governments and policies for reducing poverty, ending violence, arresting environmental degradation and improving human development status, balancing inter- and intra-regional trade, and fostering peace and harmony.¹⁵

Unofficial SAARC – A Way Out

Despite the criticism, the SAARC forum has enabled a constructive space for dialogue between member states. A significant success of SAARC has been the relationship-building it has allowed at the sidelines of its formal meetings.

Apart from the official institutions established under the ambit of the SAARC, there also exists an unofficial channel of communication and interaction among member states. I.K. Gujral in his inaugural address at the conference on SAARC 2015 pointed out that the SAARC process has generated a parallel process of unofficial SAARC. It is evident that in the past two decades, there has been unprecedented rise in interaction and networking among various institutions, agencies and civil society organizations in South Asia. This unofficial cooperation exists on various issues, especially for the promotion of human rights, conflict resolution, health, business, performing arts etc. Concluding his address, Mr. Gujral said, 'I have the increasing

¹⁵ *ibid.*

feeling that unofficial SAARC is going to be the driving force behind the official SAARC process. This is some sort of “new regionalism” that is fact engulfing the entire South Asia region’.¹⁶

According to this concept of new regionalism, civil society has a big stake in promoting regional cooperation. An analysis of intangible outcomes of the SAARC process is essential in an assessment of its efficiency in promoting a regional identity. The most recent example of this is the pressure by the civil society on their respective governments to evolve legal provisions to curb the menace of trafficking of the girl child and women in South Asia. It was this networking among civil society organizations and activists which resulted in pressurizing the SAARC leaders to sign a Convention to fight this critical problem in the eleventh SAARC summit held in Kathmandu in early 2002.¹⁷

Despite ups and downs in political relations of countries in the South Asian region, civil society organizations have been continuously making efforts to improve relations and create spaces for the governments to develop agendas for the upcoming meetings. It was estimated that in 1998-99 alone there were over 38 track-II channels working in South Asia,¹⁸ which is indicative of the involvement of civil society actors. Thus, unofficial SAARC is fast emerging in domestic and regional peace constituencies.¹⁹

The practice of unofficial SAARC has particularly impacted the conflict between India and Pakistan. A landmark was the January 2004 Islamabad SAARC summit meeting where for the first time since the 1999 Lahore Declaration, the two countries’ leaders – India’s PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf – adopted a positive posture towards each other. They also issued a joint statement in which they pledged to resume state-level talks on Kashmir.

There have also been social movements initiated by the civil society to forge people-to-people connection forum in South Asia. This has also enabled non-governmental voices to be heard at the regional level. One such initiative is the South Asia Partnership International (SAP-I) with its member

¹⁶ I.K. Gujral, Inaugural address’, *SAARC 2015 expanding horizons and forging cooperation in a resurgent Asia*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New Delhi, 2007, pg. 19.

¹⁷ Mahendra, Lama, ‘SAARC dynamics of emerging new regionalism’, Conference on expansion of SAARC: challenges and opportunities, organized by Institute of Foreign Affairs and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Nepal, 2006.

¹⁸ Niaz Naik, ‘Confidence building in South Asia: problems and prospects’ Seminar paper presented in the International Seminar on *South Asian Economic Cooperation: problems and prospects*, organized by the Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo, 2001.

¹⁹ Lama, *Conference on expansion of SAARC: challenges and opportunities*, 2006

organizations in Bangladesh, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. For more than 20 years they have been promoting regionalism through civil society initiatives. This network is organizing the People's Summit since 2001, which is to promote the people's agenda, since the formal structure of SAARC is inadequate to enable an interaction with the civil society.

SAARC and other Regional Cooperation Mechanisms

In the light of state-centric interests hijacking the regional agenda, SAARC's relationship with external players is also crucial. For instance, India's growing clout in global politics is being perceived with suspicion and concern by smaller states in SAARC and the recent strategic partnership between India and the United States further exacerbates this suspicion. Thus, while external players through their economic and political influence could provide incentives and useful lessons for regional integration, they could also act as an impediment in the budding South Asian integration process.

Other regions, including some dominated by lower-income developing states, have drawn from building up mutual mechanisms that address their security needs either directly or indirectly. Europe has explored this formula and demonstrated its advantages most fully with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), which put an effective stop to war among the Western states after 1945 (and has helped to contain their remaining internal disorders) and then spread the benefits more widely with the enlargement decisions of the late 20th and early 21st century.

More recently, the ending of prolonged and bloody inter-state conflict in South-East Asia has been both marked and consolidated by the strengthening of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), its enlargement to such countries as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, and its increasingly formalized cooperation and dialogue relationships with Asia's larger powers. China and Russia's relationship, if still complex, has been stabilized with the help of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The multilateral organizations of Latin America and the Caribbean are generally seen as weaker, not least because of their multiplicity and many overlaps, but their explicit efforts for confidence building and conflict prevention or resolution have certainly played a role in the gradual phasing out of interstate conflicts in the region and the containment of such intra-state ones as remain (e.g. in Colombia and Haiti).²⁰

²⁰ A. Bailes, *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*

Regional cooperation mechanisms around the globe have been influential in resolving or at least transforming inter-state conflicts, and in this regard, the example of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is quite appropriate and relevant to SAARC. It is interesting to note that despite the existence of fourteen inter-state conflicts (territorial and maritime conflicts), the absence of war among the member countries is no doubt a major achievement of ASEAN. Since the creation of ASEAN in 1967, not only ASEAN itself is free from war, but also none of the ASEAN member states have fought an outright war with a non-ASEAN state. Unlike SAARC, ASEAN has not hesitated to deal with issues of inter-state conflicts and simultaneously it has extended its processes of conflict prevention to the Asia Pacific region. In this regard, since 1994, there is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is also called ASEAN's model of preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution.²¹

Regional communities such as the European Union and ASEAN have flourished due to a number of integrative factors. The concept of 'Cooperative Security and Comprehensive Security' were used in ASEAN for designing the basic objectives of this forum. These objectives were to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interests and concern; and make significant contribution to efforts towards confidence building and preventive diplomacy in the region. It set up a three-stage process consisting of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution.²² India and Pakistan are also members of ARF.

SAARC on the other hand, has not experienced these integrative factors in any substantive way and will need to if the region is to develop any sense of community. Strong regional cooperation will never be effective unless both people and their leaders can comprehend the mutual benefits of coming together. Unless the comparative advantages of intra-regional trade are realized by trade and economic leaders, and until the cost of non-cooperation is calculated by the elites of each member country, the development of SAARC as a community will remain a far cry.

Member states of SAARC are engaged in multilateral cooperation frameworks beyond the South Asian region, thus providing them an

²¹ L. Mangi, *Regional Cooperation: Southeast Asian Experience*, International Seminar on Regional Cooperation in Asia and Option for Pakistan, Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Pakistan, 2007.

²² Niaz Niak, *South Asian Economic Cooperation: problems and prospects*, 2001

opportunity to learn and adopt some of these effective mechanisms. It is often debated that the participation of SAARC members in other regional frameworks will dilute the interests of member states in SAARC, and therefore will undermine the progress of this regional cooperation mechanism. However, there are others who believe that the formal and informal interaction with other regional frameworks will help SAARC in improving its progress by learning from the experiences of others.²³

Organization

ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (ASEAN PMC)	India
Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), created in 2002	Pakistan (founding member), India (founding member), Sri Lanka (joined in 2003 and Bangladesh (founding member)
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), since 1994	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka
Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), founded in 1985	Afghanistan and Pakistan (founding member)
East Asian Summit (EAS), since 2005	India
ASEM since 2006	India and Pakistan

Conclusion

The framework of SAARC provides its member states with a regional space for policy making and implementation at the South Asian level. Globalization has unleashed both opportunities and challenges. It has been proceeding at such a pace that unless South Asian states act together there, is every possibility that they will be left behind. As yet, South Asia has been unable to act together, even in terms of articulating common ills like poverty, while dealing with global leaders setting the tunes of future trade, environmental protection, and poverty reduction strategies throughout the world.

²³ Attanaik, *Strategic Analysis*, 2006

Yet, despite criticism, there have been some positive developments in the South Asian region which have the potential to improve the efficacy of the SAARC forum. Since 2003, India-Pakistan relations have shown at least a temporary trend towards stabilization. Direct government to government talks have addressed various types of confidence-building measures; a modest step has been taken to open up communications and human contact across the de facto boundary in Kashmir. The demands of humanitarian relief work after the major earthquake of October 2005, which hit Kashmir particularly hard, brought some further positive energy to the relationship after a cautious start.²⁴ Efforts have also been made in the field of terrorism. A Joint Anti-terror Mechanism between India and Pakistan is now operational, since its first meeting, on 6 March 2007 in Islamabad. At the meeting, the Pakistani side presented evidence of involvement of Indian intelligence agencies in the Balochistan insurgency. However, officials from the Indian side denied these allegations. On the other hand, the Indian officials failed to present specific information on the Samjhauta Express²⁵ blasts and just provided a sketch of a Pakistani who allegedly disappeared in India after the blasts. Information however was shared after the Mumbai Blasts of July 2006. At the inter-governmental levels, the ongoing composite dialogue between India and Pakistan provides not only optimism but opportunities to addressing issues that characterize one of the most severe and conflictual inter-state relationships in South Asia.²⁶

Soon after its inception, the SAARC had taken into consideration the most important issues of terrorism. And most recently, the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh has emphasized the need for a zero tolerance towards terrorism. While there was significant debate within SAARC over the formal definition of terrorism adopted in the SAARC Convention on Terrorism, a consensus was subsequently reached leading to the Additional Protocol to the Convention in 2006. Yet problems continue with the effective implementation of this convention.

The December 2004 tsunami disaster was a powerful reminder of the littoral states' shared vulnerabilities in the realm of human security, and it has given rise to a concrete cooperative scheme for the Indian Ocean Tsunami

²⁴ A. Bailes, *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*, 2007

²⁵ In the beginning of 2007, a tragic incident happened with Samjhauta Express (also called a friendship train, however the literal meaning could be compromise/understanding express), which caught fire due to two crude home-made bombs' explosion. At least 60 casualties were reported, most of them were Pakistanis returning home. Nevertheless, this incident threatened ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan.

²⁶ Deepti, Mahajan, 'Identity, nation and the region: trends and concerns in South Asia', *WISCOMP CT Working Paper IX*, WISCOMP Foundation for Universal Responsibility, New Delhi, 2007.

Warning and Mitigation system. Other powerful drivers are to be found in the threat of HIV/AIDS, which the UN fears may be in danger of getting out of control, especially in India, and of avian influenza, which reached India in January and Pakistan in April 2006. Climate change, and particularly global warming, poses the threat of flooding, especially for Bangladesh and some of the Indian Ocean island states.²⁷

It is theoretically possible that new life might be breathed into SAARC itself by using it to address traditional and non-traditional security issues, where the nature of the regional powers' interests is relatively little affected by their different sizes or by conventional enmities, and where – in many cases – commitments entered into or campaigns launched at global level could provide a ready-made brief for action. Energy and environmental security (including natural disaster handling), transport security and combating epidemic disease would be examples.

A second scenario would start from the definite (if still modest and reversible) progress made in confidence building and in some other concrete areas of cooperation between India and Pakistan. In addition, the settlement that might eventually come in Sri Lanka, together with the evident need for some kind of security framework of a simultaneously sustaining and containing kind around Afghanistan. Building on such localized steps and needs to construct a wider regional regime of confidence building, transparency and security cooperation could be an approach.

A third scenario would be for India and Pakistan to approach local security cooperation 'by the long way round'; from gaining experience of working together in groupings centered somewhere outside their own region. Both are members of ARF and can apply to attend APEC meetings as 'guests'. India was invited to join the new East Asian Summit (EAS) which met for the first time at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in December 2005 and which consciously excludes the United States. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, which brings together the 25 (27 since 2007) EU member states, the European Commission and 13 Asian states, agreed at its summit meeting at Helsinki on 10 September 2006 to invite India, Mongolia and Pakistan to join. Subsequently, India, Mongolia, Pakistan and the ASEAN Secretariat were admitted as members in the ASEM at the Helsinki summit 2006. India and Pakistan are observers in and would like to be full members of the six-

²⁷ A. Bailes, *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*, 2007

member Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which links China and Russia with four Central Asian states and also has Iran and Mongolia as observers. The SCO has an agenda that is highly pertinent to South Asia's needs, with its focus on cooperation in combating terrorism, extremism, secessionism and crime, stabilizing borders, and reducing military threats, notably through constraints on armed forces in mutual frontier zones.²⁸

For most of the people, even from inside South Asia, internal pressure from citizens of SAARC member states is invisible towards extending cooperation at the regional level. However, there have been some wonderful examples of regional cooperation (especially in art and culture) initiatives from citizens of South Asia.

The international community needs a peaceful South Asia; it is therefore in their interests to make some productive efforts in resolving conflicts and for ensuring cooperation in South Asia. The SAARC as a body needs some reforms too, so to efficiently deal with any issue of regional or global concern; and greater seriousness is demanded in terms of moving this regional framework over any deadlocks. Zahangir Kabir from the SAARC Human Resource Development Centre concludes his paper on SAARC with following powerful words, 'In its third decade, SAARC should substantially be brought out of five star hotels and be placed to the closer of the teeming millions of the region for their welfare. The Association must get rid of the accusation that the organization has become for "talk shops" and only organizing the numerous meetings without generating any meaningful result'.²⁹ The SAARC has to get deeply rooted into the lives of the people of South Asia and become a living body feeling the sentiments of people in all of its member states; and this can be achieved by permitting civil society's presence in the SAARC platform. This will nevertheless add more life into this regional body and hopefully will enhance the process of regional cooperation in South Asia.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Zahangir Kabir, *Challenges of SAARC in its Third Decade*, SAARC Human Resource Development Centre, Islamabad, 2005, pg. 11.