

SOUTH ASIA TOGETHER
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Regional Cooperation in South Asia

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Thousands of years ago, Aristotle contended that man is a social animal. His survival depends on others. If he can manage without others he is either God or Satan. The same contention applies to the modern Nation State system. Nature has blessed countries and regions with resources which are complementary in nature. Cooperation thus seems the law of nature. Throughout the history of mankind people have sorted to cooperation in one way or the other, and for varied interests, however, it was during the second half of the 20th century that the concept of cooperation, more precisely the term regional cooperation, politically gained currency. There emerged successful examples of regional cooperation that provided genesis for security and peace ultimately aimed at gaining prosperity and welfare. Unfortunately, we live in a part of the world, which is slow in adapting change. So also is the case with regional cooperation. The process started here in the early 1980s with the South Asian Regional Cooperation, which later emerged as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

SAARC, identifying cooperation in economic and commercial, social, infrastructure development, tourism and energy sectors, started its journey towards an assured future. The new emerging areas are science and technology. Substantial work has been done in the promotion of culture and sports among the seven states of the region. Nonetheless, South Asia is far from enjoying the fruits of cooperation. Why is this so? One reason may be that it focuses mainly on economic cooperation. Notwithstanding, its primary economic focus, regional cooperation encompasses a much wider field. Under its fold come security, strategic deterrence, strategic defiance and social development. At the domestic level, regional cooperation creates a conducive environment for nations to pursue their national objectives of strengthening good governance, democratic structures, socio-economic development and social integration for developing a civil society. It reinforces and supports promotion of peace and security at both national and regional

levels. Regional cooperation can also bring together such nations which otherwise may be of diverse history, culture and geography.¹

For the success of regional cooperation, an important factor is the commitment to the ideology of peace, progress and prosperity for the overall betterment of humankind. Obviously the regional and national interests are distinctly separate but the concept of regional cooperation envisages their integration only to the extent whereby the accomplishment of one would not be at the cost of the other. The cooperation which is conceived and initiated on positive lines can never be a threat to any country.² Keeping this in view, cooperation can be launched in multifaceted areas ranging from security to sports. There is a considerable scope for cooperation among the South Asian countries in the following areas:

- Defence and security
- Trade
- Industry
- Education
- Science and Technology
- Social and Cultural
- Training and management
- Irrigation and drainage
- Forestry

The region provides ample scope for cooperation. The land and topography of the region is such that it is practically one geographical unit. All the countries have experienced generally similar process of historical evolution. Despite differences in physical appearance, complexion, stature and other ethnological features, the people of the entire region of South Asia are unified by a common cultural and excellent literature in

¹ Fasahat H. Syed, 'The Concept of Regional Cooperation among Indian Ocean Countries' in Fasahat H. Syed (ed.), *Regional Cooperation Among Indian Ocean Countries* (Islamabad: Asia Printers, 1999), pp.5-20.

² Ibid.

Sanskrit, Prakrit and regional languages.³ Moreover, areas of existing cooperation such as communications, travel facilities, trade and economic cooperation, scientific and cultural exchanges, bilateral and regional dialogue and Tracks diplomacy need to be fully explored and extended. In the era of globalization, countries cannot safeguard their interests individually. Thus, the only rational course they are left with is to follow the path of cooperation.

II

Pakistan has always supported the process of regional cooperation. Its active participation in number of regional organizations is proof to this. Pakistan also supports the sub-regional cooperation and perceives it desirable. It advocates its conviction that a peaceful and secure environment in the region is indispensable for the promotion of economic growth, development, progress and prosperity. However, it is reluctant to follow the requirements of regional cooperation when the cooperation is only stipulated in the economic field while totally ignoring the political realities, as is the case with India. Pakistan, of course, considers it too risky in the presence of political disputes to follow economic cooperation as it fears that it would undermine its position over the existing disputes. And this again is beyond doubt, because of the obvious obstacles in the way of cooperation.

III

The most important feature of the security environment of South Asia is its strategic asymmetry. Differences in strategic depths pose profound security dilemmas. For example, India is the largest country in the region in terms of size, resources and power. This strategic asymmetry in the region creates a natural sense of insecurity in the smaller states. This sense of insecurity in turn has led to divergent security perceptions in the region that is reflected by the practical policies of all the regional states.

³ Krishna Gopal, *Geopolitical Relations and Regional Cooperation: A Study of South Asia* (New Delhi: Trans Asia publication, 1996), pp. 19-20.

India, impelled by considerations of geopolitics as well as historical traditions, conceives its neighboring countries as lying within its defense perimeter and being integrated to its security interests. It desperately wants all the countries of the region to cooperate with it in keeping external strategic interests and influence out of the region. While on the other side, India's neighbors themselves regard India as the source of their own insecurity against whom it is necessary to organize their own security interests even on an extra regional basis.

This diversity of perceptions has provided an excellent opportunity to the outside powers to exploit the regional differences into their own benefit. Thereby, the interest of major powers in South Asia along with their interests in the Indian Ocean and nuclear armaments further accentuate regional frictions.

Special geographic features also put one state in a less favorable situation in relation with its neighbor or potential adversaries. A state's dependence on water that originates in another country is one example. The sharing of common water in South Asia, particularly that of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, have been the subject of controversial discussion for many years.⁴ In the same fashion, territorial disputes over the demarcation of land and maritime boundaries always cast hostile clouds over the process of cooperation in the region.

The other barrier to cooperation in the region is the asymmetry in the military inventories of potential adversaries. Particularly after the nuclear explosion by the two rivals in the region, the security environment has become more dangerous. As there is conventional military asymmetry between India and Pakistan, chances of nuclear clash are even high over the unresolved dispute of Kashmir. Even if countries keep restraint, chances of accidental encounter can hardly be overlooked.

Another impediment in the way of cooperation in South Asia is the existence of a number of bilateral disputes, which proved to be too difficult to resolve. Furthermore, intra-state conflicts over ethnic, linguistic and religious issues in the region often assume inter-state

⁴ Ben Crow, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters? Conflict and Cooperation over the Waters of South Asia" in Sony Devabhaktuni (ed.) "Regional Cooperation in south Asia: Prospects and Problems," *Occasional Paper, No. 32* (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, February 1997), pp. 1-35.

character with cross-border implications. The main reason behind this is the cross-border affiliations of such groups as most of the countries in the region host large ethnic minorities. The transformation of intra-state conflict into the inter-state one has always been and still remains the single most dominant factor contributing to violent conflicts in the region.

A further obstacle to intra-regional cooperation is the increased interaction of adjacent areas making the delineation of the region problematic, for example, the sub-continent and the Gulf.⁵ These overlapping relationships reflect the interdependence of security horizons on the part of regional states. India is an example when it defines the Indian Ocean as part of its security environment or when Pakistan defines itself a natural part or the principled party in the development of West Asia etc.

On the economic front, historically because of common historical and geographical considerations certain exportable commodities were produced in one particular country of the region and economies of the respective nations of South Asia were basically complementary in nature. But with the liquidation of the British Empire and the ensuing bitterness between the ruling elite of India and Pakistan, the complementary process was reversed. Since complement nature of economies is an important feature of cooperation countries of the region seem less enthusiastic for it.⁶

Along with all above mentioned obstacles, the intra-state problems/shortcomings also constitute great impediments in the way of regional cooperation. The countries of the region are in the early stage of nation building which is being conducted in a highly pluralistic setting. The maltreatment of religious and ethnic minorities has always been an issue between neighbors. Due to internal conflicts of various types, particularly those of ethno-religious and feelings of insecurity for various political, economic and environmental reasons there has been one of the world's largest concentrations of refugees in South Asia. The presence of refugees in the host country, in turn creates,

⁵ Shahram Chubin, "The Nature of Security Problems in Developing Countries: Intra-Regional Relations," *PSIS Occasional Paper, No. 2/84* (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International Studies, June 1984), p. 22.

⁶ Krishna Gopal, *op.cit.*, p. 81.

spreads and exacerbates conflict, tension and insecurity that often leads to involvement of the host country in the conflict of the refugee generating country.⁷

In addition, the receding of government authority in many countries of the region has several implications for cooperation in the region. The breakdown of authority translates into less freedom of action for a government seeking cooperation with its neighbor. Second, non-governmental entities such as ethnic groups straddle borders, which makes it difficult for an individual government to exert control. Third the loss of governmental authority makes it difficult for governments to deliver on promises that may be circumvented by transnational groups. This is evident from every example of cooperative effort in the region, particularly, in the case of India and Pakistan; where severe domestic pressure impedes any bold step taken to reduce tension.

Civil society plays an influential role in the policy making decision. Mostly in the states where civil society has a greater say in policy making process there is ample scope for peace and cooperative initiatives. Unfortunately armed forces played a dominant role in South Asia. There is very little scope for the greater part of civil society to have any role or voice in the policy making process. Peoples' ignorance in the region is exploited to strengthen one's power in the respective countries that from the very beginning has set a vicious circle of mistrust and suspicion in inter-state relations.

The process of cooperation can successfully be launched if all the seven nations bring about changes in their attitudes and regional policies. On priority basis there needs:

- To develop political will to reverse the course of confrontation.
- To show willingness and commitment to live together.
- To accept the state framework as it is.
- To expand civil societies, both within and between nations.
- To strengthen regional institutions.
- To develop understanding on security matters within the region while seeking cooperation from contiguous regions.

⁷ S. D. Muni and Lok Raj Baral (eds.), *Refugees and Security in South Asia* (Colombo/New Delhi: Konark Publication Pvt. Ltd., 1996).

- Accommodate interests of small neighbors.
- To translate principle of cooperation envisaged in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter.
- To encourage economic cooperative endeavors.

IV

SAARC certainly can play a vital role in facilitating the process of regional cooperation provided its shortcomings are removed. The Table below explains these shortcomings in a glance.

Table-1

NO	Shortcomings of SAARC
1	Difference in approaches and attitude of member countries.
2	Presence of inter-state conflicts.
3	Inequitable sharing of costs and benefits.
4	Disparity in regional resources.
5	The lack of interdependence in matters of trade. The intra-regional trade constitutes only 5% of world trade.
6	Inadequacy of transport and communication facilities among the various members of SAARC.
7	Lack of free travel and free movement of people. That causes suspicions.
8	Lack of united stand on various international issues.
9	Certain institutional and procedural shortcomings.
10	Sinking bilateral differences/narrow perspective.
11	Bureaucratic problems.

V

The other non-state actors---like media, NGOs, trade unions and business chambers are remarkable facilitating the process of regional cooperation in South Asia. Whatever

awareness is there about the cooperation is an output of increased interaction among the non-state actors. Their role needs to be more strengthened. There are certain negative elements in these circles too. They equally needed to be identified. As we see more awareness in non-state actors about the benefits of cooperation and cost of conflict, a visionary leadership that gives people direction should come from there. Once it gains masses support nothing can reverse it. Shahrām Chubin emphasizes the need to have consensus on a basic minimum platform that can lay the basis for cooperation in any region. South Asian countries today need the acceptance of this platform. At society level, perhaps that acceptance has come. All being waited at the moment is political will to transform the course of confrontation to cooperation.