

Essay on The Success of SAARC in Changing Scenario

Founded in 1985 to foster economic, social, and neighborly relations amongst the member countries of the region, the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has not been a success so far. SAARC comprises seven nations namely Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka of South Asia. It was originally conceived by Bangladesh President Zia-ur-Rahman, with a view of benefitting all the member nations, because of close and friendly economic and social cooperation, if possible.

The SAARC Charter provides for annual summits that mean 19 summits so far, but under the compulsions of politics of the region, only 11 summits have taken place.

Only a few SAARC summits have taken place without being marred by one controversy or the other. In fact, the Islamabad summit scheduled to be held in Jan. 2004, was postponed over India's stand not to attend, because of Pakistan's involvement in cross-border terrorism in India. The 11th Kathmandu summit of Jan. 2002, was also delayed because of the bloodless military coup in Pakistan in Oct. 1999 and the incidence of hijacking of Indian Airlines plane in Dec. 1999. When the 11th summit finally took place in the backdrop of Dec 13, 2003, attack on the Indian Parliament, the eyes of the world were focussed on the melodramatic handshake by Pakistan's president General Musharraf with his counterpart Mr. Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India.

Undoubtedly the continuing differences among the member countries especially the big brothers, India and Pakistan have overshadowed the spirit of regional cooperation and hampered the growth of the SAARC. Though the SAARC-Charter clearly barred the discussion on bilateral

issues during the summit, yet Pakistan had always been trying to take up the Kashmir issue, in every summit, on the pretext that without solving the Kashmir issue, no cooperation can be thought of. India also made use of a bilateral problem, cross-border terrorism, when declining to attend the 12th Islamabad summit. Earlier Sri Lanka had also refused to take part in SAARC foreign minister's conference in 1998, in protest against some of India's policies.

Although bilateral issues have hampered the progress of the organization, yet in various summits, informal discussions were held between the nations concerned, and that produced some useful results. In Male summit in 1997, when, the then Prime Minister and Sharif agreed on a mechanism for resolving outstanding issues, which set in motion a concrete process. The second was in 1998, during the Colombo summit, held after the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan, a meeting between Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif took place that paved the way for the Lahore bus journey by Mr. Vajpayee.

No concrete results could have been emanated since the creation of SAARC. Various reasons are there for such a failure, one being, the tension between the member nations like India and Bangladesh have migration problem, India and Srilanka have a question of Tamils, India and Pakistan have Kashmir issue and cross border terrorism, second, being disparities in size and resources, meaning thereby, smaller nation's eye India with distrust. Moreover, SAARC nations lack an identity of views, even minimal understanding, on political and security issues.

With globalization being spread throughout all the countries, it is but necessary for the SAARC nations to develop regional cooperation for their benefit. In 90's Pakistan had dragged its feet over SAARC preferential trading agreement (SAPTA), the scheme of economic cooperation among SAARC member countries, whose framework agreement

was later finalized in 1993 and which formally came into operation in Dec. 95. SAPTA was envisaged primarily as the first step toward the transition to a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) leading towards a customs union, common market, and economic union.

In spite of these grand visions, not much progress has so far been made under the SAPTA rounds of negotiation, mainly because of the limited exchange of trade concessions between India and Pakistan. Under the three rounds of SAPTA negotiations, about 3000 tariff lines have been offered for concession by member countries. The concessions offered were about 10 to 15 percent lower than the prevailing tariff rates. It is a matter of regret that even after this there has been no significant expansion in intra SAARC trade, which was a mere \$3094 million in 2001, 4.8% of the total exports of all the seven nations.

Changing scenario

With the improvement in relations between India and Pakistan, beginning with a ceasefire along the LOC, and the cricket team of India toured Pakistan, it is being expected now, that some positive direction in the matter of trade among the member nations may take place.

It has to be realized and accepted by the member nations that so long as they remain reluctant to trade freely with all other members, the SAARC will remain a dead, theoretical concept. India is the largest member nation should show greater flexibility and readiness in responding to the needs of smaller SAARC members.

It is worthwhile to note that other regional organizations like ASEAN that have successfully expanded their mutual cooperation in spite of the political differences. The ECM (European Common Market) has taken long strides forward and has emerged today in the European Union with

a common currency. While in SAARC, Pakistan has always raised the question of Kashmir prior to the beginning of any economic progress. All the SAARC nations particularly Pakistan have to realize that strategy of economic cooperation and development hold the key for all kinds of political settlements and for the peace and security of the region.

Despite, every member nation is suffering from the problems of illiteracy, poverty, disease, population explosion, corruption, etc. they should be united to benefit mutually, keeping aside the political problems hitherto made the main task. These nations are bound together geographically, culturally, and historically. SAARC countries can assist one another, by launching a joint strategy to solve their problems for which every member has to work with honesty and sincerely. It requires a staunch will of the political leaders, keeping in front the mono aim of the welfare of the people of the region by accelerating economic cooperation, social progress, and cultural development in the region. Nothing but peace, prosperity, all-around progress in the region can make the region flourish with fast economic growth, fast development of every nation. Let us hope that SAARC nations shall build a well focussed economic, social and cultural agenda for 2020, keeping aside the political differences that have hitherto hampered the path of cooperation and prosperity of the region.