

This is How the Dream of Regional Integration Become a Reality in South Asia

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Abstract

Regionalism is said to be the most powerful tool in the globalization process. All the regions of the world have been greatly influenced by it. South Asia being a part of the world body was also influenced. The integration process contains three important phases. It is observed that during the process many differences arose which demonstrated different social, political, economic and cultural out looks of the member countries. After tiresome efforts by the elite the dream was fulfilled. The inception was a rough a tough task, the current effort aims at a thorough investigation of the whole process 'how the organization was created.

Keywords: Globalization; Regionalism; Integration; Conception; Evolution

Introduction

In the emerging world there is greater dependency of nation-states over one another. The interdependence among the modern states is demonstrated in the shape of globalism and regionalism. The dependency process has led the world towards supranational integration or regionalism. Regional integration is the most serious and successful contemporary effort to supplant the nation-state.¹ In the present nuclear era conclusions have been made, that there would be increasing interdependence of nations economically and culturally because every nation holds a weapon that can possibly destroy other nations more or less completely.² Statesmen, after World War II presented a solution to overcome the deficiencies of the nations who were acting alone by tempting to alliances regional association, and preliminary integration in limited sense.³ Regional organization as a concept has assumed significance in contemporary international politics. Even the smallest unit of international system tends to play some important role in international political arena. South Asia being a part of the world did could not ignore the changing trends of the world system.

Significance of Regional Integration

The countries in third world are trying this as a support for their demands to abolish the inequality of economic change and neo-colonial exploitation.⁴ They are aware of the fact that through regional

cooperation amongst them, they can better deal with their common political, social and economic problems.⁵ The technological advancement and revolution in the communication system has cut short the physical distances in such a way that the world has become one body. In the physically advanced world, supranational organizations have become an indispensable reality.

Recognized, that regional integration is a multidimensional phenomenon [1].⁶ It is a comparatively new development into international politics. Article 21 of the League covenant provided for "regional understanding for securing peace". The United Nations charter, under articles 51, 52 and 53 recognizes the role of regional actors in the maintenance of international peace and security. Regional integration can rightly be called a corner stone of globalization [2].⁷ One of the salient features of regionalism is that, it suggests the creation of regional institutions. Regional institutions carry out the implementation of regional policies. Regional policies demonstrate solidarity and cohesiveness between and among regional social-fiber. Thus regional institutions are the limbs and legs of integrative regional activities.

Bruce M Russet asserts that there are some collective factors which manifest the support base for every collective effort. The collective factors are, "economics, social homogeneity, proximity, interaction, frequency, interdependence and loyalty."⁸ The states involved in the integration process also represent their people (the social strata), they formulate and act upon systematic orientation of developmental strategies; they would certainly accept the signal for regional cooperation [3].⁹ Thus, regionalism represents itself as a global cum

¹ Patrick M. Morgan, Theories and Approaches to International Politics (USA: Transaction, 1994), 219.

² Ibid, 207.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vandana Mohala, SAARC and Super Powers (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1998), 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Donald Puchala, International Transactions and Regional Integration, trans. Lindberg and Scheingold, 128.

⁷ Innis Claude Jr., Swords into Plowshares, 4th Edition (New York: Random House, 1956), 111-120.

⁸ Russet M. Bruce, International Regions and International System (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), 198-201.

⁹ Rehman A, Political Economy of SAARC (New Delhi: Sterling, 1986), 12.

regional phenomenon. Because, after regional integration; a region represents itself in the global context.

South Asia

The post-World Wars period was unique for it provided a lesson to the nations that cooperation not wars was the solution of their problems. Therefore, they turned their attention from dispute creation towards dispute resolution. The only option with them was to cooperate; beyond their national boundaries, to facilitate trade and social and culture activities. Therefore, they had to build cooperative institutional mechanisms at last. One of the main features of the international and regional institutions established immediately after World War II was to contain communism and flourish democracy and vice versa.

South Asia was a part of the world's social, political and cultural activities. It was impossible for this region to escape the changing landscape of international political and economic order, which emerge send quickly after the devastating World War II. The European integration model (European Union model) was followed in other parts of the world according to their own physical demands and social systems.

The Establishment of SAARC

South Asia's response to regionalism was not as quick as South East Asia (ASEAN), yet, 'it was not too late than 1985 that South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed [4].'¹⁰ South Asia was late to respond to the integration models being followed in different parts of the world because the pattern of security perceptions and foreign policy orientations were different in different states. On May 2, 1980 president Zia-Ur-Rehman of Bangladesh was the leading South Asian leader to propose the arrangement for regional cooperation in the region.

Conceptual Stage

The concept of regional cooperation was in the view at different venues, almost three conferences had already discussed the idea of regional cooperation prior to Bangladesh president did [5].¹¹ In this connection the Era from late 1970s to early 1980s is worth mentioning. The South Asian states made serious efforts for restoration of cordiality and defusing tensions. The period in the 1970s witnessed great restoration of bilateralism and mutual respect in the attitude of Asian governments towards one another. Though a sense of cooperation prevailed among the South Asian actors yet the political disputes were voicing in the background. Beside many hurdles all the mentioned steps were very satisfactory for the future cooperation [6].¹²

Theoretical Stage

The late Zia-Ur-Rehman (former Bangladesh president) was more interested than any other in extending the hands of cooperation into a

combined regional effort; he presented his design during his famous visits to the capitals before the proposal was mooted in the 1980s. An assessment of the geo-political realities was made in regard to the strong and soft reactions of the member states; finally, a working paper on the conceptual frame work was circulated.¹³

A strong plea was made in the working paper for promoting the mutual trust and confidence for greater political comprehension; it emphasized for reasonable regional cooperation. The working paper instigated that the countries of the region would work under the shadow of non-alignment and commonwealth for bilateral and regional cooperation. This effort did not exploit the potential of regional cooperation and consistent benefits that were to be brought to the regional countries.

The working paper indicated the areas for mutual cooperation including economic, technical, scientific and cultural fields. It also mentioned that all the member states will be altogether in the organization on equity basis. The weak and exploited areas would be developed through the evolutionary process of cooperation. It was hoped that shared heritage would be a unifying factor for minimizing bilateral differences. The commonalities in ethnicity, language, history and culture will further strengthen the bonds of unity.

It was expected that the regional cooperation will create harmony in the region.¹⁴ The paper saw that the existing bilateral and multilateral relations were not very solid. Therefore, the organization will provide a solid base for the future cooperation. It strongly convinces that, regional integration in South Asia will be 'a gradual process.' It proposed convening of regional conferences leading to Summit Conferences that could guarantee political support and appreciation at international level.

Keeping aside political tensions, the paper identified the following areas to start with: (i) agriculture; (ii) telecommunication; (iii) meteorology; (iv) transport; (v) shipping; (vi) tourism; (vii) joint ventures; (viii) market protection; (ix) scientific and technological cooperation; (x) education; and (xi) cultural cooperation.

In the working paper references were made about the framework, structure and functions of regional cooperation. It described the Summit meeting with caution that, "For generating the environment of goodwill and understanding historical and emotional barriers to be considered for avoiding suspicions."¹⁵

Evaluation Process

The evaluation process of the working paper brought some reservations and preferences from almost all the regional states. India being the most dominant figure in the region felt hesitation; that it feared in the grouping to be turned against her. That's why India stressed on the exclusion of bilateral and contentious issues from the table of discussion.

Pakistan feared that the Indian Political strength could also create problems for the smaller economies of the region. The exclusion of

¹⁰ Q.A.M.A. Rahim, "South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation (SAARC)," SAARC Secretariat (Kathmandu, Nepal), <http://www.saarc-sec.org/>.

¹¹ Hafeez Malik, *Dilemmas of National Security and Cooperation in India and Pakistan* (New York: St. Martin, 1993), 276.

¹² Fold and Govern Boys, *Comparative Regional Systems*, 271.

¹³ Shamsul Haq, "Beyond Bangalore," *South Asian Journal*, July-September (1987): Vol. 1, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

bilateral problems and prevalence of common political agenda were two essential points for a pledge aimed at regional cooperation. Bangladesh suspected that, "the informal forum to be institutionalized would have drawbacks [7]."¹⁶

On the part of Sri Lanka, reservations were serious, because she had applied to the membership of ASEAN only just a month after the first meeting of foreign secretaries held [8].¹⁷ Sri Lanka had suspicions about functional nature of regionalism that's why it desired political issues to be in the agenda like that of ASEAN. While in the case of Bhutan and Maldives, the idea was happily accepted without any such reservations.

Overall, the working paper was not a sweet chocolate for all the regional countries. Their perceptions translated their different political, social and ideological environments and their national interest orientations. Though, the initial response of the seven Asian actors was a mark of exclamation, yet the first meeting of foreign secretaries was a landmark achievement towards the inception of the ambitious regional forum.

Evolutionary Phases

The evolution of SAARC comprises three important phases. The first phase was from 1981 to 1983. In this phase all the seven founding countries considering the Bangladeshi paper intended to hold an 'Official level meeting' without directly moving to a 'foreign ministers conference.' The second phase was from 1983 to 1985. In this phase the evolutionary process reached at political level and the foreign ministers level meeting was convened. The third and the most important phase began in December 1985, during which the highest level 'Summit meetings' were held that led to the emergence of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The phase from 1981 to 1983

In the follow-up of Bangladesh paper the foreign secretaries of all the member states met in Colombo from April 21-23, 1981. Delivering the inaugural speech Mr. A.C.S. Hameed, the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka said, "that our objective is to develop collective self-reliance as a parallel strategy to global economic cooperation,"... and, "the process should be constructive to establish a framework for regional cooperation in South Asia [9]."¹⁸

The entire member countries agreed that regional cooperation would not be specified to the bilateral cooperation only, rather it will also provide a chance for greater multilateral style cooperation [10].¹⁹ The theme for regional cooperation suggested two things, adopting principles of unanimity and sidelining bilateral issues. The regional members must be careful in their mutual intercourse about: (a) sovereign equality; (b) non-interference and respect. The organization will move forward in a balance manner [11].²⁰

Five basic areas were selected for cooperation, (i) agriculture; (ii) rural development; (iii) telecommunication; (iv) meteorology; (v) health and population. Separate study groups were launched for each area under the supervision of one member country each. In the next step committee of the whole was established which worked as a consultative body and it highlighted thirteen areas where cooperation could be possible but as described above the cooperation was launched with five study groups. In defining the mentioned interactive areas of cooperation the development process was seen as an enduring effort [12].²¹

It is clear that the very beginning of SAARC excluded the political and foreign policy related issues so the march towards prosperity and regional integration was not well begun. The new regionalist research paradigm is theoretically challenged by many views sharing the thesis that the political dimension of regional integration is unlikely [13].²² After the first successful foreign secretary level meeting; the second meeting was held in Kathmandu in November 1981.

In the fourth meeting of Foreign Secretaries held in Dhaka from March 28-30, 1983, it was decided to convene a foreign Ministers level conference in August. In this connection a feasibility meeting of the foreign secretaries was dated in New Delhi from July 28-29, 1983. The meeting facilitated the provisional agenda for the foreign ministers meeting. It also prepared the text of draft declaration.

The phase from 1983 to 1985

After the series of comprehensive bureaucratic level meetings, the Regionalism of south Asia entered the, Implementation phase from the preparatory work [14].²³

The first foreign ministers meeting in New Delhi marked an important phase in the evolution of regional cooperation goal in South Asia. It was not an easier task to fulfill; it took two years of bargaining and advocacy to mould the minds of South Asian 'elite' into a collective thinking for regional coherence. On August 2, 1983, when the 'Declaration draft' was signed the SAARC was officially launched. The foreign ministers meeting also emphasized the collective determination of the member countries to the commitment of the goal of regional cooperation [15].²⁴ The importance of the meeting lies in the fact that it recognized the need for launching the organization, objective principles and institutional framework. The communiqué declared exclusion of bilateral disputes from the working agenda. The declaration mentioned the supremacy of the principles of non-interference, sovereign equality, and territorial integrity.

The second foreign ministers level conference was convened in July, 1984. For facilitating regional connectivity, the innovation in telecommunication and airways between the capitals of South Asian countries was stressed. The conference was followed up by the second standing committee meeting. The ministers expressed their deep

¹⁶ Dawn Karachi, May 29, 1980.

¹⁷ Seshadri K and Ehsan-Ul-Haq, *Studies in the Problems of the Third World* (New Delhi: Uppal, 1985), 190.

¹⁸ "FROM SARC TO SAARC: Milestones in the Cooperation in South Asia," (1980-1988): Vol. I., 9.

¹⁹ "The text of joint Communiqué," first meeting of foreign Secretaries (Colombo: April 23, 1981): 9.

²⁰ Mishra PK, "Towards a Framework of South Asian Regional Cooperation: Colombo to Kathmandu," New Delhi (1982): Vol. 31, 214.

²¹ The report was issued by the committee of the whole in 1981, during its Colombo meeting.

²² For an introduction to this scientific discussion see, Mansfield ED and Milner HV (1997); Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (1995); Coleman W and Underhill G (1998); Lake DA and Morgan PM (1997).

²³ Samina Ahmad, "South Asian Regional Cooperation," *Regional Studies* (Islamabad): Vol. 1, 90.

²⁴ Bimal Prasad, *Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Problems and Prospects* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1989), 64-65.

concern on the grabbing economic and social conditions of the developing world, and also called for operational initiatives [16].²⁵ The Ministers desired for a meeting at Summit level in the near future. Sri Lanka restrained herself from attending the next meeting held on May 10-11, 1985 at Thimpo; due to Indian inelegant statement about the Tamils. The meeting was convened with the frantic efforts by Pakistan and India [17].²⁶ The third foreign ministers meeting drew more attention because it emphasized planning and execution of certain projects.

Before the fourth foreign ministerial meeting the Committee level meeting was held on December 04, 1985 at Dhaka. It made recommendations for a draft charter and SAARC's emblem.²⁷ The meeting approved the recommendations of the committee and enlisted Drug-trafficking and international terrorism to be brought on the agenda in the next meeting. Moreover, the draft declaration and SAARC emblem recommended by the committee meeting were put-off to the Summit meeting.

The final phase, December 1985

'That is not last which comes at last,' SAARC resulted from the tiresome efforts spreading over not less than five years. The words SARC and SAARC though have similar pronunciation yet they are slightly different for the first refer to the concept (outgrowth) while the second refer to the institutional mechanism of regional cooperation.²⁸ SAARC was formally brought into action in the concluding hours of the Dhaka Summit meeting. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (and now Afghanistan, 2007) is an organization for cooperation, fundamentally regarded as an economic unification to work together for accelerating the pace of socio-economic and cultural development [18].²⁹ Finally, SAARC was formed on December 8th, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh to initiate number of objectives for the development of the whole region [19-24].³⁰ The summit adopted two important documents at the end Dhaka Declaration and the SAARC Charter.

Conclusion

No one can imagine being isolated from the world community and progressive also. Since its inception till to date SAARC has been failing to achieve the promised goals. SAARC region is a developing region and through this organization the founding fathers not only expected progress and prosperity for their respective countries but also for the whole region. After such a long span of time SAARC has not become an active tool for development and prosperity of the region. It is

imperative for all the member countries in general and Pakistan and India in particular to make things right. By devising conflict management systems they can avoid conflicting tendencies. So in the changing landscape of politics, economic and social structures in the world it is required from the member countries of SAARC to seriously implement their decisions for the better future of the succeeding generations.

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²⁶ Vindana Mohala, SAARC and Super Powers (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1998), 80.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kanesalingam, "Strengthening and Consolidating the SAARC Process," ed. Vindana Mohala, 81.

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³⁰ Dhirendra Dwivedi, SAARC: Problems and Prospects (New Delhi: Adhyayan, 2008), 1.