



MAJOR PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF THE SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Abstract: To provide and promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through faster economic, social and cultural development, an association named South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation was formed which is the largest economic and political organization of eight South Asian nations with almost 1.5 billion people, the combined population of its member states which came into existence for faster economic growth, all type Rural Development, so that all realize their full potential. Along with the five areas of cooperation such as Agriculture and Rural Development, Telecommunications, Science, Technology and Meteorology, Health and Population Activities, Transport and Human Resource Development the top priority of SAARC is Fast-tracking the economic growth” and cultural development, opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials by every individual and understanding each other on common matter.

Key words: development, faster economic growth, five areas, fast-tracking, common matters, problems, challenges.

Introduction: Many issues and challenges faced by SAARC since its origin and failures to realize its ambitious objectives incompatible to the promotion of regional cooperation and has hampered development and growth of the region. The main idea to establish SAARC was to promote peace and economic progress through mutual partnership of states in the region by combining the available resources.

SAARC says that only multilateral issues are for inclusion in the agenda in a SAARC summit on the basis of unanimity. The SAARC platform thus cannot be used to resolve bilateral issues, which undermined the scope and potential of SAARC. The unsolved borders have caused stressed and led to problems of Terrorism, Refugee Crisis, Smuggling and drug Trade; The quest of maintaining distinct cultural identity by every country has not allowed the region to come together; failed to come up with a free trade agreement; vast economic disparities in the region; The South Asia Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA) not yet been operationalized; The proposal to establish South Asian Food Reserve and South Asian Development Fund is still in the pipeline; declarations on boosting political cooperation and promotion of mutual trust and understanding received limited success; and smaller countries in the region feel insecure.

In three decades it failed to hold annual summits in a successful manner as every country have tense political relations with each other. Major cause responsible for political strives can be regional disparities. All member states are unequal in status, size, population, natural resources and the economic growth and development. These dissimilarities have strained bilateral relations

of all countries. The blame game of disturbing each other's domestic peace between India and Pakistan is ongoing. India was in favor of finding a bilateral solution to the Kashmir issue.

Bangladesh and Pakistan on territory issues, illegal migration from Bangladesh to India, issues of sharing Ganges water and construction of Farakka Barrage, The bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka were not smooth on Tamilians' issue and India's sympathetic attitude towards LTTE. The Sri Lankan Government imposed economic barrier and stopped food supplies. India wanted to supply foodstuff by sea for delivering them directly to the Tamilians. But Sri Lankan navy did not allow. The Indian Air Force escorted by Mirage-2000 fighter-bombers dropped relief aid in Jaffna. The Sri Lanka condemned this action as violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty and looked it as deliberate action to weaken territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Relations further deteriorated over the ethnic crisis etc. India and Nepal differ on firstly, purchase of arms including antiaircraft guns and medium range surface-to-surface missiles along with AK-49 assault rifles from China that is not in the defense interest of India, secondly, peace model and thirdly, treaties for Trade and Transit. However, India enjoys almost cordial relations with Bhutan and Maldives.

The SAARC drafted in 1985, referred to eliminate poverty and improving the living standards and welfare of the people. Integrated Program of Action (IPAs) in Agriculture and Rural Development, Human Resources Development, and Social Development were initiated. During 6th SAARC Summit in Colombo in 1991, SAARC members suggested to have an Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA1) to address the issue of poverty in the region. In 1992 a report titled 'Meeting the Challenge' was prepared saying that poor should be empowered by social mobilization through different projects. 'Our Future Our Responsibility, published in 2003: mainstreaming the informal economy, reviewing laws and policies which impact on the livelihoods of the poor, enhancing gender equities, prudent macroeconomics, sustainable development and mobilizing the power of the poor by 2010. Period from 2006 to 2015 was declared as the 'Decade of Poverty Alleviation'. The report, titled "SAARC Regional Poverty Profile", underlined that still 32 percent South Asian people live on less than 1.25 US dollars per person a day. There is large difference among the states in regards to the food production. India is main producer of all food items except lentils and edible oils, Pakistan is a grower of wheat and rice, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka grow mainly rice, and Nepal imports cereals, pulses and fish. Afghanistan, Bhutan and Maldives depend on import foodstuff. Reaffirming that the pursuit of inclusion, good governance, and poverty alleviation, especially the elimination of extreme poverty, are essential to the promotion and consolidation of democracy is one of the major principle of SAARC which needs to be fulfilled on priority basis because poverty, if not eliminated or decreased gives birth to many repercussions such as unemployment, rising population, scarcity of resources and low standard of living which further results in overall downfall of the economy.

Due to fast growing population unemployment is a big challenge for SAARC countries. Regular wage or salaried workers represent a fifth or less of the total employment. According to him the first major challenge is the low female participation rate in the region. The lowest rates are in the three large South Asian countries: Pakistan where four out of every five women do not participate in the labor market; The second major challenge is enabling an increase in the share of rural labor force off the farm. The concentration of working South Asians in rural areas

reflects that more than 70 percent of the region's working age population lives in rural areas and rural employment rates are higher than urban areas in all countries except Maldives. The third major challenge in South Asia is the issue of 'informality' in employment that leads to low earnings, less skills and little access to formal social protection systems. Informal workers include all workers performing informal jobs in agriculture; casual laborers, family enterprises workers and self-employed workers with less than senior secondary education in the non-agricultural sectors. The most prominent example of the latter is India's National Skill Development Corporation, which provides gap financing to trainers in 21 key manufacturing and service sectors.

Cross Border Terrorism

Cross border terrorism and sense of distrust are serious challenges faced by the SAARC countries that hinder the efforts to bring people together, peace, prosperity and progress in the region but facing an existential crisis with its relevance coming under question. Tense situation itself is believed to be a big question mark now SAARC. Unresolved cross Borders and maritime issues further aggravate the problems of Terrorism, Refugee Crisis, Smuggling, drug Trade. Technical limitations and a lack of capacity and lack of confidence have limited the action plan.

The 2008 attacks in Mumbai, where gunmen traveled by boat from Pakistan's port of Karachi to India, clearly highlighted the transnational dimension of the threat and the essential need for a regional approach to intelligence sharing, law enforcement and other forms of counterterrorism cooperation. Yet pursuing a regional approach involving "all key players in South Asia" on any security related issue, let alone the extremely sensitive matter of fighting terrorism, is fraught with challenges.

Cross border terrorism affected the working of SAARC to have the 19th SAARC summit, that was scheduled to held in Pakistan in November 2016. Pakistan was suspected of attacking Indian army base in Uri. The rising diplomatic tensions after the Uri terrorist attack, forced members to boycott the summit, and pulled out of the summit. Pakistan's increasing interference in Bangladesh's domestic affairs was unfavorable to the interest of Bangladesh.

SAARC needs to construct faith and create a new anti- terrorist forum of authorities to help provide their expertise for its control. South Asian countries can take relief from terrorism by either of the ways; one, SAARC members try a serious effort to establish good and faithful relationship by having dialogue with each other or, secondly, erect walls on the borders with the disputed states. For instance, Uri-attack of 2016 is the most recent one. India blamed Pakistan for supporting terrorists to attack Taj and Oberoi Hotels, the Central Railway Station, and a Jewish Centre in Mumbai in 2008 were associated with the terrorist organization based in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, led by Hafiz Muhammad Saeed.

Environmental issues

a. Climate Change

South Asian countries are under the real threat of climate change and there is an urgent need for governments of (SAARC) countries, to cooperate with each other to develop a mechanism to protect the environment of the region because otherwise regional governments would lack the capacity to respond to these challenges if they do not join together. The temperature has been increasing due to which the natural calamities are falling and floods and droughts are occurring in various parts of South Asia. Deforestation, air pollution and bio-diversity loss etc. are some serious challenges for the south Asian countries, which will result in extreme poverty, scarcity of food and water, energy, health hazards and economic development. Water scarcity will further create problems for agricultural development, increasing demands of fast growing population, problem of sanitation and urbanization. During the fourteenth SAARC summit held in New Delhi, the climate change issue was considered to draw solutions to deal with fast growing environmental problems. The 'Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change' were adopted in the meeting held in Dhaka in 2008.

Air pollution is one of the serious and growing problems of climate change caused by vehicular emission, industrial discharge, increasing industrialization and urbanization, oil, widely used traditional sources of energy, fuel wood, animal dung etc., and causing variety of diseases such as respiratory infections. According to a study published in Nature, 3.3 million people die prematurely from air pollution each year. SAARC has focused environment protection in every summit. The sixteenth SAARC Summit held in 2010 set the theme "Towards a Green and Happy South Asia" in the future and adopted Thimpu Statement on Climate Change. All member states decided to adopt the UN and other organizations' pattern to check environment pollution.

b. Hazardous Waste

Hazardous waste is most dangerous for human health if not disposed off properly. It not only poses risks to the surrounding air, water and soil but also do harm to the ecological environment. It has severe environmental, health, social and economic impacts. Industrial hazardous waste is defined as waste generated from industrial sectors and pose immediate danger to the environment and the public.

The amount of hazardous waste is increasing dramatically due to improper handling and disposal of waste, poor legislation and lack of proper attention by the respective governments. Hazardous industrial, medical and household waste should be disposed separately which is ignored in these countries and mixes up with water. People carelessly either throws waste in sewer or on the ground near residential locality, burn or bury because it has not been properly differentiated through appropriate schemes to manage it. The main important sources of industrial hazardous wastes are mining, chemical, mechanical, pulp and paper industries, cement production facilities, wood remanufacturing facilities, etc. It also includes electronic goods, human and farm animal medicines, waste oil, oil filters, paint and paint containers, pesticides and herbicides (household), empty cartridges, aerosols, ink and ink containers, batteries.

c. Green House Gas Emission

Global warming, climate change and carbon emission are the important areas need to be focused by SAARC countries. These countries should make an effort to reduce emission by making serious environmental policies that don't have negative impact on their income growth. Melting glaciers, flash floods, repetitive droughts, heat waves, epidemics, extensive population and energy crises have created water, food and energy nexus concerns. NASA observations and data based analyses reveal the upwind GHG emissions, haze and smog pollutants flow to Pakistan through summer monsoons. Cooperative control of regional GHG emissions, exchange of mitigation technologies and adaptation seems to be the way forward. A SAARC Super Grid concept is proposed for free energy market among SAARC countries.

Climate is also fast changing because of Fossil fuel consumption, luxurious lifestyles, urbanization, industrialization, greenhouse gases, population and economic growths affecting civilizations, animal habitats and forests. South Asia is one of the most severely affected regions on the planet due to its demographics. Challenge of environment due to gas emission is not only affecting human society but also animals like lions, leopards, dolphins, tortoise and vultures are facing serious challenge resulting in their extinction..

d. Sustainable Agricultural Challenges

The economy of South Asian countries is primarily based on agriculture that provides food and employment to the people and supports social, economic and political systems. Agriculture and industry are interdependent as they fulfill demand and supply needs of each other. Most of the rural population depends upon agriculture in the region where agricultural productivity is low resulting in the poverty. Concrete growth in agriculture is important to alleviate poverty, provide livelihood and generate employment. Development of modern technology and more and more agro-based industry is important for the region. SAARC has given priority to advancement of agriculture, livestock, fisheries, forestry and allied disciplines. But the problems of agriculture and conservation of the SAARC region are the same. Most of the farmers are small and poor so they depend upon nature and seasons for irrigation. Climate change, low water level, power cuts, high population pressure on land and use of lack of modern technology are responsible for low rate of agricultural growth resulting in very high rate of poverty and hunger. All these are posing serious threats to the food security. Increasing food prices and rising consumption of bio-fuels are also causing challenge to the food security in the region.

C. South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)

SAARC established South Asian Free Trade Area to have free trade with each other with gradual tariff reduction. The purpose of SAFTA was to encourage and elevate medium and long-term common contract among the countries involving trade operated by states, supply and import assurance in respect of specific products etc. The purpose of SAFTA was to promote common contract among the member-nations and provide them with equitable benefits. It involves agreement on tariff concession like national duties concession and non-tariff concession. It also aimed at increasing the level of cooperation in economy and trade among the SAARC nations by lowering the tariff and barriers and give special preference to the least developed countries in the region.

SAFTA had a potential at a time when regional trade blocs and free trade area have emerged as models of cooperative economic growth, the SAFTA had offered a great opportunity to take forward the process of South Asian integration. But South Asia has too much problems but South Asia is a unique regional entity in the entire world. It is a region, which has remained a prisoner of the past and pressing geopolitical realities involving India, Pakistan and China. Despite a free trade pact since 2006, trade among South Asian nations makes up five percent of their total trade. They share few transport and power connections between them. We saw how SAARC fell apart at its 2014 summit We saw how the SAARC was split during the 18th summit held in Kathmandu in 2014 end when India and Nepal accused Pakistan of creating an obstacle on the way of regional integration by refusing to sign three multilateral agreements, including road trade and sharing of electricity.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi even went to the extent of warning at that time, saying the integration would happen through the SAARC or without it. No wonder, opportunities like SAFTA were lost without a trace. SAARC could have played better role like European Union and African Union and ASEAN as the South Asian countries were looking forward to a broader picture for the group where they could have SAARC Central Bank or common currency apart from common platform to discuss issues like, poverty, terrorism, unemployment and health etc.

SAARC could not succeed as was expected and failed due to lack of political tensions, mutual trust and continuous conflicts. Trade is low and limited as the trade regimes of each country are closed to each other. In the Kathmandu Summit 2014, there were three connectivity agreements on road, rail and energy, to be endorsed by the eight SAARC leaders. But only one of these i.e. on energy has been signed. SAPTA had no significant impact on intra-regional trade of SAARC -It was firstly, one of the least ambitious trading agreements. There was a lack of commitments on tariff reduction; it was a completely voluntary arrangement. There was no clarity on rules of origin. There was no provision for a Dispute Settlement Mechanism. Unless the SAFTA framework treaty is finalized and implemented, a monetary union cannot even be conceived. As of now, certain member states, especially India and Pakistan, still deeply distrust each other and have not been able to ensure a free human movement of people..

Conclusion:

SAARC faces internal threats of terrorism and cross border illegal migration. Most of the member countries find India as a threat to their sovereignty being her largest country of SAARC and dominates the South Asian region due to its size and population. It can be a very rare example in the world where border countries are empathetic towards each other. Since independence India and Pakistan crises has remained the same even causing restlessness in the region. Diversity in cultures in the region poses challenge and countries with different religions try to assert their religious identities. For example India and Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are struggling to maintain their distinct cultural identities that stops region to come together. So all the countries of SAARC make the unity and make progress like the developed countries. All the problems of SAARC countries should be settled on the one platform so that lives of every citizen of the countries can be made prosperous.

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