



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 11 NO. 1

ISSN 2347 - 3703

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2021

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REVIVAL OF SAARC: AN ATTEMPT WORTH MAKING

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The preceding months have kept the world media and people interested in international relations busy with the changing geopolitical landscape. The rapidly changing scenario arising out of the US pullout from Afghanistan, formation of a self-proclaimed government of internationally banned terrorists, new and sudden collaboration trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and US known by the acronym (AUKUS) in the Indo-Pacific and meeting between the top leadership of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is an indication of diplomacy as a complex subject in itself. In September 2021 Pakistan PM Imran Khan Niazi delivered the talk at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)—(more) as a spokesperson for the Taliban and once again misused the international platform. Amidst all these strategic events, the repetitive failures of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) proceedings have not found much attention anywhere.

FOREIGN MINISTERS MEET

A meeting of foreign ministers from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries, scheduled to be held in New York on the sidelines of the 76th UNGA, was cancelled as the member states

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were unable to agree upon the participation of Afghanistan with its unrecognised government. Pakistan rejected outright the proposal of participation of any official from the previous Ghani administration. A decision to keep an “empty chair” as a symbolic representation of Afghanistan was also objected to by Pakistan, which insisted that the Taliban must be allowed to send its representative to the summit—a notion that all the other member states rejected in entirety.¹

SAARC FORMATION

SAARC, since its inception in 1985 at Dhaka, has seen many ups and downs and has invariably been found wanting of its core objectives of contribution through mutual trust, cooperation and prosperity. That the heads of the member states could not meet together since 2014 is testimony to this fact. The lack of appreciation of one another’s problems as per its charter, and organisational goal has only added to its woes. India has been accused of being hegemonic several times under the changing political landscape due to the internal politics of the region. Regional aspirations of smaller nations have also been the stumbling block in the progress of the SAARC. Though bilateral cooperation and mutual interests between the member states are being met through individual government-to-government association, regional collaboration and development are being affected substantially.

CHINA’S INROADS INTO THE REGION

China has made full efforts to make inroads into the Indo-Pacific. Almost every member state of SAARC has been tapped by China, thus making the association further weak and crumbling. China has successfully employed its philosophy of making the partner countries fall into its debt trap, thereby further strengthening its clutches. As stated in the Center for Global Development (CGD) report, “the Maldives is also one of eight countries at particular risk due to continued Chinese lending and can suffer from debt distress. China’s engagement with the Maldives could result in a similar situation

1. “Explained: Why the SAARC meeting was cancelled”, September 23, 2021, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/why-was-the-saarc-meeting-cancelled-7527420/>. Accessed on September 29, 2021.

where \$1.4 billion amounting to 78% of the country's external debt is owed to China."²

Another example is Sri Lanka, which took a loan from China to reconstruct its dilapidated infrastructure. But the country soon ran into economic woes and was constrained to hand over a significant portion of the Hambantota port in 2017 to pay back the loan. This modus operandi of China is well known to India and other global players. Similar concerns have been observed and raised in the case various African countries, sometimes naming China, sometimes not. The recent QUAD and AUKUS forum meets have also indicated containing China in the Indo-Pacific under the disguise of "*Free Indo-Pacific*". However, through its prudent diplomatic and military build-up measures, India has successfully thwarted the intentionally created situations such as the recent conflict in Eastern Ladakh.

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

One of the first and foremost agendas set by the NDA government for themselves after gaining mammoth support in the elections in 2014 was to harness the potential of our immediate neighbours and make our boundaries secure and sound. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has showcased the "Neighbourhood First" policy by visiting Bhutan as a first visit abroad. In accordance with its policy of "Neighbours First", the NDA Government invited Heads of State/Government from South Asia for the swearing-in ceremony of the new government, in May 2014, which reassured our neighbours that India would continue to accord priority to relations with them.³

However, the sustenance of such policy has somewhat slowed down in the last seven years. India has gained massive 'showcasing with substance' for the outer world and has been recognised globally in almost all fora. However, in the bargain, probably the immediate neighbourhood has been lost. The only contended result of effective diplomacy is handling all issues with Bangladesh, including the

2. Shantnu Roy Chaudhury, "How China Is Expanding Global Influence via Debt Trap Diplomacy", at <https://thewire.in/world/china-debt-trap-diplomacy-south-asia-europe>. Accessed on October 24, 2021.

3. Ambassador V. P. Haran (Retd.), "Challenges in India's Neighbourhood Policy", at <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?674>. Accessed on October 28, 2021.

long-pending exchange of enclaves. India is the largest democracy in the world by and an important country in Asia has got the arduous task of maintenance and sustenance of objectives of SAARC. It is time that the present government looked inwards and focused again on getting all our immediate neighbours together. India must call for a special session of SAARC in January 2022 for its revival. It will send a strong signal to all the member states and other countries who keep a special watch on all moves of India.

SUCCESSIVE FAILURE OF SAARC

SAARC forum has completed almost four decades of its inception since 1983. The last summit, which was the eighteenth of its kind, was held in Kathmandu in November 2014.

In 2016, India boycotted the Nineteenth SAARC Summit scheduled in Islamabad due to Pakistan's support to the terror attack at Uri, India. New Delhi was joined by the other five member nations citing similar concerns on terrorism. Nepal, being the chairperson, cancelled the summit and Pakistan was left alone, officially. Since then, nothing substantial has happened, and none of the member states have accrued any mutual benefit from the association as a whole. India has been engaging with all nations individually to progress development in the region. India has also been firm on its stand that Pakistan should stop propagating terrorism from its soil and stop cross-border terrorism. All member states have always stood by the Indian philosophy and commitment to fight against terrorism, as it was in the post-Pulwama attack and recently on the issue of Afghanistan.

The core objectives of SAARC as a regional group of nations have not been encouraging. A few core objectives of SAARC are to increase economic growth, promote social progress and cultural development, and improve the quality of life of people of South Asia by increasing economic cooperation and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. Each member state is progressing as an independent country in South Asia. However, they as a group have not been moving ahead as a regional power. Two of the most significant reasons are that Pakistan allows terror to grow and

propagate from its soil. Based on its economic and technological prowess, China wants to negotiate with smaller countries on a one-to-one basis. Therefore, smaller member states will have to take a call to be part of the regional development.

A cooperative trade transaction in the region was an essential ingredient for the formation of SAARC. However, today the SAARC trade stands at a meagre 5 per cent despite the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). The aspirations of intra-regional connectivity in the region have been adversely affected and yield no substantial dividends. Ironically, China—rather than a fellow member of SAARC—is the largest trade partner of many member states. As a result, SAARC has become a disaster that is considered incapable of executing its plans to meet regional interests. The fact that 400 million poor people live in the region, including its 30 per cent populace living below the povertyline, shows the prevailing adverse socio-economic scenario in the region.⁴

Unfortunately, most of the SAARC member states have a relatively low ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI), which is an indication that member states are not progressing as a region against our core objectives of overall development. Bangladesh and Maldives are the only two countries that have shown a sudden development spark due to stable internal government and maintaining cordial relations with all more prominent countries, such as India and China in the region, and significant powers globally. These countries have started focusing on all-inclusive growth in terms of life expectancy, education, and real income, which are the primary constituents of achieving a higher HDI ranking. A lower HDI ranking reflects quite poorly on the overall growth and prosperity of the region. Bilateral tensions and mistrust create an unavoidable void for external powers to venture with ease into the dynamics of South Asian politics (see Table 1).

4. Jawad Falak, "Implacable Failures of the SAARC", June 21, 2017, at <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/implacable-failures-of-the-saarc/>. Accessed on September 29, 2021.

Table 1: Human Development Index of SAARC Country

	2016	2020	Change in Ranking	Possible Reasons
India	130	131	-1	
Pakistan	147	154	-7	Terrorism
Sri Lanka	73	72	+1	
Maldives	104	96	+8	Positive ranking due to all-inclusive growth and Maintaining cordial relations with neighbours
Bangladesh	142	133	+9	
Bhutan	132	129	+3	
Nepal	145	142	+3	
Afghanistan	168	169	-1	

Source: Human Development Index Ranking of 2016 and 2020.

WAY AHEAD

TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF AFGHANISTAN

The SAARC nations, pressured by Pakistan in 2005, settled to admit Afghanistan into the bloc with the prerequisite that it first hold impartial general elections, which it did in late 2005. Subsequently, Afghanistan became the eighth member state of SAARC in 2007. While India was the only South Asian country to recognise the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in the 1980s, its relations were adversely affected during the Afghan civil wars and the Islamist Taliban's rule in the 1990s.⁵ India became the most significant regional provider of humanitarian and reconstruction aid in Afghanistan. India has undoubtedly emerged as a significant global and regional power and has always acted as a responsible nation following the principle of close cooperation. The Indian stance has been firm to contain its rival Pakistan for spreading Islamic terrorism in India through its favourite battleground of Kashmir.⁶ Bilateral relations

5. Foreign Relations of India, Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_relations_of_India. Accessed on October 1, 2021.

6. National Institute of Diplomacy, at <http://www.diplomacy.net.in/blog.html>. Accessed on October 1, 2021.

between India and Afghanistan have traditionally been strong and friendly, and India does have a major stake in Afghanistan. India has played a considerable role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation process in Afghanistan and is one of the strongest allies in the peaceful development of the country generating tremendous goodwill. India has achieved a massive feat of investing more than US\$ 2 billion⁷ towards a far-reaching assistance programme for the all-inclusive growth and development of Afghanistan. It makes India the leading donor nation showcasing an enduring commitment to the progress of Afghanistan.⁸ However, India will not allow Afghanistan to be a part of SAARC in the prevailing situation with the Taliban taking over the country. India must take the initiative to suspend Afghanistan from SAARC till the return of democracy in the state, which is not likely to happen, but in no way abandon it for retaining its strategic interest in the region and to not betray the goodwill of the Afghan people. The current government's stance in Afghanistan for respecting human rights, gender equality for women, etc., has fallen flat since its initial press briefing in August. Beheading people at public places and hanging them from trees are still everyday scenes in Afghanistan. India's initiative to have talks with Afghanistan representatives in New Delhi is an unexpected move. Still, it requires to be read as more of political action rather than a diplomatic one.

EXIT OF PAKISTAN—A CONTRARIAN VIEW

The analysis of the failure of SAARC reveals that because of one member state, Pakistan, the entire SAARC grouping is badly affected as a region. Such an approach of Pakistan has irked many of the smaller countries of the association. The South Asian grouping has further moved from a state of ineffectiveness to a paralytic end. India's deepening concerns on constant and sustained cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan has been widely acknowledged by other member states on all occasions. This has led to many members leaning towards other alternative forums like the Bay of Bengal

7. Report on "Development Partnership under Indo-Afghan Relations" published on the official website of Embassy of India, Kabul, Afghanistan, at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?000>. Accessed on October 1, 2021.

8. Ibid.

Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), centred on the Bay of Bengal, to continue working with India and effectively not abandoning the SAARC.⁹

Apart from a few sideline activities by subsidiary organisations working on routine affairs, nothing much is being done at SAARC. Pakistan's outlook and approach towards SAARC has been a stumbling block. Pakistan has been openly working as a rogue nation and the world community needs to acknowledge the fact. The recent virtual address by the Pakistan PM to the UNGA showcased how a head of state can act as a spokesman of the government formed by global terrorists. Not forgetting that Pakistan, the epicenter of international terrorism, has been the root cause of the collapse of a democratically elected government in Afghanistan. It is time for the world community and the UN to endorse it and come down hard on Islamabad. Pakistan is exceptionally deft in the art and science of money laundering and terror financing and has been struggling to get out of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list.

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat (Retd), while delivering the Distinguished Lecture series conducted by MEA at IIT, Bhubaneswar in 2017, expressed concerns on the efficacy of SAARC. He said that:

The biggest obstacle to SAARC's functioning and growth has been the frequent stand-offs between India and Pakistan—the two largest members, which between them control 80% of its land area, over 85% of its population and over 90% of its GDP. The exception to the SAARC bonhomie, and I concur with former Indian National Security adviser SS Menon, is Pakistan, not just because she is on the cusp between West and South Asia and suffers the ailments of both, but as a matter of conscious choice by the Pakistani establishment of the kind of state and society they are building, of their instruments, such as political Islam and jihadi tanzems and terrorists, and of the calculated use of tension in their relationship with their immediate neighbours.¹⁰

9. Tutorial, "The fadeout and a revival of SAARC", at <https://www.iastoppers.com/editorial-notes-the-fadeout-and-a-revival-of-saarc/>. Accessed on April 11, 2020.

10. Ambassador Anil Trigunayat (Retd.), "India and the SAARC: Implications for the neighbourhood", at <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?655>. Accessed on October 28, 2021.

Pakistan has not only been irresponsible but a constant troublemaker member state for the SAARC. As China is a rogue nation to the UN Security Council, so is Pakistan to SAARC. It is high time to accept that our relations with Pakistan are not working out. India has not been able to leverage Pakistan, which is crucial for our access to central and west Asia. So instead of maintaining a diplomatic stance of waiting for the return of Pakistan, let us ignore Pakistan for some time at least. It is time for Pakistan to be expelled from SAARC at the earliest for regional development and economic prosperity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proposed SAARC Groupings



Source: Author's own.

REVIVAL OF SAARC

While SAARC has not been effective in pursuing its stated agenda, the option of winding up the forum does exist on the grounds of ineffectiveness, which presumably can be implemented any time. However, it takes years to bring people, countries, and nations together for a common goal and therefore, it is essential to effect a regrouping of member states and draw new objectives to avoid

polarising powers and keeping smaller nations out of the debt trap of major powers (like China). Keeping the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific free is as important for other member states as for India. These concerns have also been shown by major groupings like QUAD and AUKUS and during the recently concluded UNGA.

It is the time for SAARC grouping to introspect and act on leveraging the importance of regional cooperation. The Superpowers outside South Asia can be kept away from the region if Pakistan stops the terror funding and terrorism from its soil and works more on the revival of regional cooperation and aspirations. The SAARC leaders will have to demonstrate their capability and intent to resolve all indifferences between the member states and build an environment for a peaceful and prosperous SAARC grouping. However, the success of SAARC would depend on political will, which is sadly lacking in the current scenario.

CONCLUSION

India has substantially gained in reaching out to the countries globally since 2014. Modi's outreach programme in the world has gained momentum year after another with colossal success and promise to the world. However, reaching our immediate neighbourhood has unfortunately taken a back seat. It is also evident that it is not easy to either change our neighbours or befriend them from grouping. Thus, expelling Pakistan from SAARC may not be taken well by many, including the diplomatic community. However, moving such an idea will definitely bring all other member states in harmony, enabling the easy revival of SAARC. Without its second-largest member state, these member states will have a reason to collaborate and re-energise SAARC once again. Many issues, such as climate change, water disputes, etc., may not be fully resolved without Pakistan, but SAARC without Pakistan will still have many benefits to reap in the coming years. The need of the hour is the idea of reviving SAARC for honouring the SAARC charter and accruing tremendous symbiotic gains out of it. The member states of SAARC must take a firm call to eradicate the ill effects that have cropped up due to the expansionist strategy of a rising and belligerent China and the misadventure of

Pakistan in the region. It would be a significant diplomatic feat for the member states to revive a dying SAARC to be the most efficient association of the countries in South Asia for the overall development and prosperity of the member states minus Pakistan.