

INDIA AND SAARC- STEP TOWARDS INTEGRATION

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Regionalism, in the present context of globalization, includes both political and economic interests of the nation-states. The formation and increase of the regional groupings has been most significant since the 1980s and 1990s. Almost all the nations of the world came under different regional groupings. The fundamental basis for the formation of regional groupings is the geographical proximity of the member countries involved in the pursuit of regional intergration and cooperation. On this basis, apart from other regional groupings, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for South Asians was established in 1985. But in the recent past, the establishment of regional groupings has been mainly due to the economic compulsions. The United Nations Charter also accepts the concept of regional arrangements for securing regional peace, security and cooperation.

Asia - Regional Organisations

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The concept of regional cooperation arises with the common experience and sufferings under the European domination. However, divergence of political and economic interests among nations, precluded any broader regional cooperation in Asia. Sub-regional cooperation in South East Asia began to develop from the early 1950s. Emergence of China and increasing pressure of the communist armed struggle in most of the countries of the region became one of the factors of regional cooperation. Further, the success of the European Economic Community acted as a fillip to the idea of South East Asian regionalism. Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and others have witnessed positive results of regional cooperation. But, regional groupings like GCC in West Asia and SAARC have not been so successful due to regional conflicts, mistrust and disunity. But, if they adopt effective strategies and resolve issues of conflict, they can make a lasting impact in the area of regional cooperation. If South Asian countries move towards regional economic integration, improved quality and connectivity of infrastructure and intra-SAARC trade, they will get good opportunities for rapidly accelerating economic growth.

India and SAARC-

The establishment of SAARC marked the initiation of regional cooperation in South Asia. It is considered to be the most important development of the 1980s in this region. It also sounded the beginning of regional integration. Regional cooperation in South Asia is backed by common factors which are geographic, ethnic, linguistic, religious, civilizational, socio-economic etc. The greater the interaction, the better become the chances of success of cooperative endeavours. The South Asian region has commonality of these factors with minor variations.

SAARC was essentially an economic grouping as vindicated by its formation at a time when regional integration was considered panacea for quick economic progress. In the first Inaugural Summit in 1985, the King of Nepal anticipated that regional cooperation could strengthen the building of a lasting edifice of peaceful co-existence through initiatives and interactions in the scientific, technological and economic fields. SAARC was not only viewed as a forum for enhancing sovereignty and fostering peace, freedom and social justice among

member states, it was also viewed as a framework for promoting the welfare and prosperity of South Asians and improving their quality of life.

SAARC is in an expansion mode as there is a tendency to outreach into the wider area of global economic and technological regime and, hence, forge interregional linkages. Besides the seven members India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan and Maldives, Afghanistan was formally admitted into the regional group in 2005. Iran, China, Japan, South Korea, USA, EU enjoy observer status in the SAARC. This indicates the geographical contiguity is no more an absolutely essential condition of regionalism.

SAARC has undergone through two distinct phases. The first was a preparatory phase which gradually initiated regional cooperation in non-controversial areas. The second was an expansionary phase in which regional cooperation was expanded in social and economic sectors. But the progress of SAARC has been slow because its establishment was laid in the backdrop of a strained political-economic and security environment. It has been rather a platform for expression of dissent by member countries.

In spite of insecurities, SAARC has made progress through South Asia Free Trade Agreement, in the realm of economic cooperation. Since its inception, the region has registered a higher percentage of trade transactions. South Asia can benefit much through regional cooperation if it works out on some of the issues, like energy requirement, resolving water disputes, transit facilities for the movement of energy resources, settlement of territorial disputes, eradication of terrorism etc.

The new Government of India under the leadership of Narendra Modi has declared its intentions to bring about major changes in domestic and external spheres. The new government's pledge to bring about greater economic integration could probably bring about a radical change in India's engagement with the rest of South Asian region. India has successfully addressed bilateral programs such as Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh or diplomatic move towards Sri Lanka's Tamil issue. Bilateral visits also have importance as they denote the willingness of a state to engage with other states. The political belief of the present government demonstrates an image of geo-political and geo-economic agenda which implies the state's firm belief in trade and economics as a means to achieve the desired goal.

One typical problem in South Asia are great dissimilarities among nations of this region on various grounds which are not conducive to the uninhibited growth of regional cooperation. India is making an attempt to become the natural leader of this alliance. It has the capacity to bring about new economic strength throughout South Asia and create a bloc in the long run. It has taken some initiative in the area of human rights, regional telecom regulation system etc. India has also proposed to develop a satellite to assist her neighbours. Space technology will be used for socio economic development of the region. The region of South Asia can be peaceful, secure and development oriented if it adheres to principles of democratisation, secularism and pluralism. Anti-terrorist laws need to be commonly accepted and implemented as a matter of policy and faith.

Ultimately, it can be said that India, being a founder member of SAARC, has always been committed to regional cooperation in the economic, political, social, technological and cultural spheres.