

NEPAL'S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING SAARC

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the overall efforts undertaken by Nepal to activate the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), particularly after the indefinite postponement of its 19th Summit that was scheduled to take place in Islamabad, Pakistan, on November 9-10, 2016. As a strong proponent of regionalism and regional cooperation, Nepal's position has always been making the regional body vibrant and result-oriented; and Nepal has been relentlessly working for the same since its very inception. Much has been written about SAARC and Nepal, still very little literature is available that sincerely digs out the concrete efforts made by Nepal to strengthen the SAARC process. Therefore, this study tries to fulfill this gap. Additionally, this aims to make policy prescriptions for the revival and strengthening of SAARC. The study consists of both primary and secondary data collected from books, seminar papers, policy briefs and newspapers. It applies both qualitative and quantitative approaches while analysing Nepal's efforts in strengthening the SAARC process.

Keywords: Nepal, SAARC, Regional Cooperation, Summits, India-Pak Standoff

Introduction:

SAARC was created three-and-a-half decades ago with the common agenda of enhancing regional cooperation and ensuring deeper regional integration for the rapid socio-economic development of the member countries and the region as a whole. In 2007, Afghanistan joined it to become its eighth member. SAARC primarily aims to promote the welfare of South Asians; improve their quality of life; accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development; provide all individuals an opportunity to live in dignity and realise their full potentials; and promote and strengthen collective self-reliance (MOFA, 2017).

Since its very inception, there have been 18 summit-level meetings until 2014. Previously, it used to be held every year, but now it is held every two years on a rotational basis and is attended by the heads of state/government of the

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member states. The track record of the past three-and-a-half-decades shows that it has not achieved satisfactory results despite having huge potential for regional cooperation and integration of the South Asian countries.

During the period, SAARC has signed several agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoU), but their implementation remains dismal. 'That is precisely the reason why the member states declared at the 13th SAARC Summit in 2005 that the third decade of SAARC would be a decade for implementation (Rahman, 2011, p.51). Despite the unsatisfactory performance as a multilateral framework for cooperation, SAARC's mere existence continues to provide hope to the people of South Asia for better cooperation in the future (ibid). Even after this declaration, there has not been much progress when it comes to implementing past agreements.

There could be several factors behind the sluggish pace of the regional body, but the chronic Indo-Pak conflict is the dominant reason. Experts are of the view that regional organisations are facing increasing challenges in light of the changing global and regional scenario. The race for 'regionalism' has taken a back gear. "We are not in the 1980s and 1990s, when debate on regionalism was at its zenith. Under these circumstances, the role of the regional organisation, including that of SARRC, has simply disappeared. Nepal as Chair of SAARC is pushing for revival of the SAARC process, but given the intensity of the conflict between India and Pakistan, the chances of such efforts providing any tangible results would be very slim (Bhatta, 2019).

Due to the same reason, the regional body is dysfunctional. From the perspective of international relations, there are various types of regional organisations in terms of their functioning and effectiveness.

SAARC is also being perceived as 'zombie' organization today. Literature on international relations describes three different types of regional and international organisations-alive, dead and zombie. The first refers to organisations that are alive and functioning (Kumar, 2018). The second type consists of those that have died, though this happens rarely. Finally, 'zombie' organisations are those that continue to operate but without making any progress towards their mandates. Zombie organisations maintain "a level of semi-regular operation, but output in terms of progress on their goals falls below expectation. SAARC falls under the zombie organisation because it is in operation but not making any progress in its mandate (ibid).

To push SAARC towards fulfilling its mandate, there should be regular functioning of all mechanisms of the body, including the summit-level meeting, but it is not an easy task. Reviving SAARC as a vibrant organisation is a

challenging job due to the Indo-Pak tension and fast changing geopolitics of the region. Despite such challenges, Nepal as a strong proponent of the regional organisation and founding member is continuously and consistently pushing for the smooth functioning of SAARC because it believes that regionalism serves its national interests. Regarding Nepal's strong belief in regionalism, Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali (2019) said:

“We believe in regionalism as a vehicle for trade and economic growth. Last year, we successfully hosted the fourth BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu. We are the Chair of SAARC and have consistently worked to revive the stalled SAARC process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

When SAARC faces obstacles today, historical evidences show how Nepal along with other like-minded countries worked proactively to bring all member countries together. With the same understanding, this study begins by discussing the emergence of South Asian regionalism and critically discusses Nepal's efforts to strengthen SAARC, while India pushes for BIMSTEC over SAARC.

Emergence of regionalism and SAARC

The idea of regionalism gathered momentum across the globe mainly after the end of World War II. Western European countries first mooted the idea of regionalism with the purpose of harnessing social and economic development to ensure robust cooperation among the countries.

New alignments and strategies were vital in the wake of the Cold War to expand areas of influence in the newly emerging international domain. During the Cold War, a host of regional organisations such as the RIO Pact, Organisation of American States in Latin America, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Western Europe, Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in West Asia, Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) came into existence. Regionalism as a means of consolidating relations with the countries of a particular geographic area or like-minded countries to preserve and promote their common politico-strategic and economic interests gained momentum in the post- Second World War international order. It is considered to be a concept somewhere in the middle of nationalism and universalism (Upreti, 2008, p.1).

There are many regional organisations across the globe, and the common destiny of all organisations is to achieve economic cooperation and upgrade the idea of growing together. The basic objective of any regional organisation is to integrate its members through common economic aspirations. It means that despite having acrimonious political or strategic relations, economic aspects would ultimately help bring harmony and cooperation among member

countries (Khanal, 2010, p. 156).

Another stimulus for the advancement of the idea of regionalism was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This became a key foreign policy plank of Third World countries, which provided an impetus for regional cooperation soon after World War II. NAM itself was not a regional organisation, but it contributed to spurring the concept of regionalism in Third World countries that were not allied to any of the power blocs led by either the US or the former Soviet Union.

The wave of regionalism and NAM prompted South Asian countries to forge a regional organisation to deal with their common problems, such as poverty, connectivity and improving the lives of its people. The efforts towards regional cooperation in South Asia began as a part of the phenomenon of Asian identity. In fact, the post-independence leadership in India thought it in terms of cooperation in South Asia from a wider perspective. Since it was felt that most of the Asian countries had similar experiences of colonial exploitation and underdevelopment, so there was a need to work together for preserving their independence and sovereignty (Upreti, 2008, p. 9).

With the realisation of a regional body of South Asian countries, fresh ideas were floated in the 1970s, and discussions among academicians, civil society and media started to pick up about the necessity of such an organisation.

All countries sought help from other countries in their respective endeavour for economic development and quest for political stability because all countries of this region were suffering from common problems of instability, poverty, unemployment and other social and economic woes. On the other hand, the leadership of South Asian countries sought political legitimacy of their regime because some countries were newly formed, while others were passing through a dictatorship.

In the ongoing debate on regionalism, in fact, Nepal is the first country in South Asia that proposed regional cooperation on utilising its water resources to produce hydro power (Thapaliya, 2019, pp. 117-127). While addressing a gathering of foreign delegates to the 26th Colombo Plan Consultative Meeting in Kathmandu in 1977, King Birendra had said, "It is our conviction that if cooperation can be called for, especially cooperation of Asian countries such as Nepal, India, China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and all other regional countries, a vast resource of bountiful nature can be tapped for the benefit of man in this region....Given genuine friendship and mutual cooperation, I declare in the name of my people and my government that Nepal is willing to co-operate in such a joint venture, a venture that will lead not only to 'Planning Prosperity Together' but also emphasise our independence"(Thapaliya, 2019, pp. 117-127).

Nepal's initiations to establish the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu was another proof of its strong commitment to the regional body. Bangladesh had proposed to establish the secretariat in Dhaka, but King Birendra insisted on keeping it in Kathmandu. The Kathmandu Declaration, endorsed by the Third SAARC Summit held in November 1987, states: "The Heads of State or Government expressed their satisfaction at the establishment of the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, further strengthening the process of regional cooperation in South Asia. They expressed their gratitude to His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev for most graciously inaugurating the SAARC Secretariat (SAARC Declaration, 1987). Not only the SAARC Secretariat, two vital centres-the SAARC Tuberculosis Centre and SAARC Information Centre-were also established in Nepal.

By forming regional organisations like SAARC, Nepal wanted to transform its bilateral cooperation into a broader regional framework and arrangement. In 1988, King Birendra once more reiterated that 'Nepal is willing to cooperate in any venture for the multipurpose development of her water resources, bilaterally, trilaterally or multilaterally for the mutual benefit of the region (Thapaliya, 2014-2015, pp. 117-127). As Nepal actively supported regionalism, Bangladesh took the lead in the campaign to establish a regional organisation. Then Bangladeshi President Zia-ur-Rahman first tossed the idea of regional cooperation by holding informal discussions. Experts from South Asia also recognise the initiation taken by Nepal to forge SAARC. Informal discussions regarding the need of a new regional organisation were going on for a long period, but a concrete proposal for regional cooperation in South Asia came from Bangladeshi President Zia-ur-Rahman in May 1980. In fact, he had been working on this idea for quite some time and had been approaching India and other countries in the region. The then King Birendra strongly backed the idea floated by then Bangladeshi President Zia-Ur-Rahman regarding the formation of a regional body (Upreti, 2008, p.9).

Before SAARC came into existence, other regional organisations had already begun to function in Asia. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) had begun functioning by 1967, having evolved as an independent grouping from the defense organisation, the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (Nihar, 2012, pp. 49-55).

All these developments prompted the South Asian countries to come together to form a regional grouping. After seven countries, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, agreed to set up a regional organisation, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formally set up with the signing of the SAARC Charter in

Dhaka on December 8, 1985. The Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on January 17, 1987.

Though other countries stood in favour of regionalism, the idea of establishing SAARC did not go well with India and Pakistan. India was of the view that through the establishment of the regional body, small countries in the regional body would gang up against it. In Pakistan, there was the fear that India's domination would further cement in the region through SAARC. Amid such apprehensions, SAARC was founded because other countries in the region strongly backed the formation of the regional body, and India and Pakistan were not in a position of rejecting such ideas (Bhattacharjee, 2018, p. 14). So, despite having some reservations, both India and Pakistan joined SAARC because other countries in the region had pushed forward the idea. Also there was a wave of regionalism after 1970, with the United Nations too acknowledging the concept of regional trade.

“The idea of establishing regional cooperation in this part of the world was reinforced by the acknowledgement of the concept of regional trade arrangements during the 6th Session of the UN General Assembly in 1974” (Hamal, 2014 p 43-59).

When it comes to Nepal's regional affiliation, Nepal is a member of SAARC, a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a member of Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and it is also a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Nepal's strong backing of the regional organisation is also reflected in its conduct and functioning of its foreign policy. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a separate division called the 'Regional Organisation Division' dealing with SAARC and BIMSTEC, which is headed by a joint secretary.

SAARC: Hostage of Indo-Pak tension

Since its inception, SAARC has been caught up in the conflict between India and Pakistan. Due to the conflict between the two nuclear powers, summit-level meetings have been deferred several times, paralysing the entire SAARC process, which has badly affected ongoing projects and scheduled projects. South Asian scholars have been stating that the status of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan has been a major influencing factor for the survival of the SAARC. It is also believed that being two major and nuclear power countries in South Asia, SAARC would remain a so-called talking shop until these two countries could see eye to eye with each other keeping aside or resolving their loads of issues, bickering and animosity developed as a result

of the legacy of the colonial era. Regionalism should precede bilateralism, and it should give way to more strong regional commitment that would help create a peaceful, just and harmonious community in South Asia (Khanal, 2010, pp. 156-157).

Amid the India-Pakistan tension, experts are of the view that as the largest member country, India bears greater responsibility to revive the SAARC process. SAARC today suffers from many problems. But an attitude of its central power that SAARC was born with anti-Indian zest, relations between its two powerful members and collective decisions to bureaucratise the Secretariat are at the centre. As the most powerful member, by far the largest in size, population, economy and military, India's political leadership bears a special responsibility to lead the SAARC process forward or else inspire the smaller members to lead the transformative process by supporting intellectually, diplomatically and financially" (Simkhada, 2018, pp. 30-31).

Experts are of the view that the only way towards revitalising the SAARC process is holding its due SAARC summit as soon as possible, and for that to happen, there is a need to maintain cordial relations between India and Pakistan, but they are nowhere in sight. SAARC can only be revitalised by taking damage control measures like holding the 19th SAARC Summit at the earliest; refraining from hostile propaganda against each other; implementing the decisions of SAARC for bettering regional cooperation; and pursuing a forward looking instead of a retrogressive approach. Personnel vendetta, which is a known culture of South Asia, needs to be replaced with a positive vision so that the future of the region is better than its past and present (Moonis, 2018, pp. 45-46).

Amid the dark clouds hanging over SAARC, there are silver linings, too. The video conference among the government and state heads of the eight South Asian countries on March 15, 2020 has sprouted some hope about reviving the moribund SAARC, but it failed to give fresh impetus to the whole SAARC process. The conference was the first of its kind after the indefinite postponement of the 2016 SAARC Summit and suggests that SAARC member countries are capable of collaboration on pressing common issues, such as public health and climate change, by setting aside their other differences.

The India-Pakistan standoff was clearly seen during the video conference as well when Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan failed to participate. Khan designated his Minister of State for Health Dr. Zafar Mirza, who used the forum to make remarks on Kashmir, in response to which India later remarked that Pakistan had misused the platform.

SAARC as an organisation has not functioning effectively as a regional organisation largely due to the conflict between the two. In its 35 years, SAARC has held 18 summits. There was the provision of holding a summit-level meeting every year, but the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2014 decided to hold it every two years. Even under the new provision, three summits should have been held in the last six years, but not even one has taken place. From 1985 to 1988, summits took place on an annual basis. Again from 1990 to 1993, summits were held annually. Summits again took place in 1997 and 1998. After that summits usually took place biennially. Then the summits took place in 2004, and in 2005, 2010 and 2011. After that, the 18th Summit was held in 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Till now, Nepal has convened three SAARC summits-in 1987, 2002 and 2014. In the last decade, the frequency of summits has gone down compared to the first two decades. While the first decade witnessed eight summits, the second decade saw six and the third decade only four. There are also examples of India and Pakistan agreeing to hold SAARC summits even during crises. The summits have provided them an opportunity to interact with each other on the sidelines of the meetings.

In 2004, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee attended the SAARC Summit held in Islamabad. In the SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2002, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf held a brief chat. So, despite the strained bilateral relations, India and Pakistan must agree to hold the next SAARC summit as soon as possible.

Nepal's Efforts to Strengthen SAARC

Since its inception, Nepal has always stood in favour of organising SAARC summits on time and strictly implementing decisions taken at the summits. This paper, however, has certain limitations as it documents only the efforts made by the Government of Nepal to revive the SAARC process mainly after the indefinite postponement of the SAARC summit that was to take place in Pakistan in 2016. Not only holding summits, Nepal is consistently and continuously pushing for the effective implementation of decisions reached after the 18th SAARC Summit.

There is a need for regular follow-up and implementation of decisions made at the summit from all government mechanisms. As we have made international commitments, it would be our bounden duty to help implement the decisions, fulfill the obligations and promote regional cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d). With the need to give priority to SAARC commitments, sustained efforts on Nepal's part, as the current Chair of SAARC, to negotiate and

navigate in the regional organisation, is required taking into consideration Nepal's sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, protection and promotion of national interests via regionalism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).

Nepal's post-2016 : Efforts to Revive SAARC

As in the past, Nepal as the Chair of SAARC is working hard to convince other countries to hold the summit-level meeting as soon as possible. The 18th SAARC Summit held in Nepal had decided to hold the 19th SAARC Summit on November 9-10 2016, in Islamabad and had set to hand over SAARC's chairmanship to Pakistan.

However, the planned 19th Summit was cancelled at the eleventh hour after India refused to attend it following the Uri attack, an Indian Army base camp in Kashmir. Besides India, four other SAARC members-Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka-pulled out of the summit, indirectly blaming Pakistan for creating an environment not suitable for holding a successful summit. The four countries then had immediately supported India's position to boycott the SAARC summit. Nepal's case was, however, different, as it was not in favour of postponing the summit indefinitely. Nepal issued a press statement commenting that it had taken this development seriously. Nepal went on to urge the regional partners to create a conducive environment for holding the 19th SAARC summit at the earliest despite the Indo-Pak tensions. After Pakistan informed Nepal about the postponement of the SAARC summit, Nepal issued another statement regretting the postponement for an indefinite period, as it was not possible to hold the summit without having all member countries on board. In this period, Nepal took a firm stance against postponing the SAARC summit for an indefinite period.

Since then, Nepal has been requesting India to agree to hold the SAARC summit at all bilateral talks and meetings. However, India has been insisting that the regional environment was not conducive for holding the summit while proposing that it could participate in the SAARC process if it was organised outside Islamabad. However, Pakistan is unwilling to oblige. At all bilateral and regional forums, the KP Oli-led government formed in 2018 has been continuously stating that there is no alternative to SAARC and thus needs to be revitalised sooner than later.

On February 8, 2020, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli visited the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu. There, PM Oli remarked, "Neighbourhood relations and regional cooperation are one of the priorities of our foreign policy. As a founding member and current Chair of SAARC, Nepal strongly believes in regional cooperation to promote collective well-being of the people of South Asia" (The Himalayan Times, February 8, 2020).

Highlighting the importance of SAARC and Nepal's unwavering support to it, PM Oli further said that SAARC was an expression of our regional solidarity in South Asia and that it had become a common identity for the people of this region (ibid). "It represents hope of over 1.7 billion people from this region for accelerated economic growth, social progress and cultural development." Stating that the 19th SAARC Summit was long overdue, he said, "We are eagerly looking forward to handing over the chairmanship. I hope the SAARC member states will come up with consensus to convene the summit at an early date" (ibid).

With the purpose of reviving the SAARC process, Nepal, as the current Chair of SAARC, hosted informal meeting of SAARC foreign ministers on the margin of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York in September 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. But those meetings were overshadowed by the India-Pakistan conflict. On September 27, 2019, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi kept away from the SAARC Foreign Ministers meeting as the Indian Foreign Minister was delivering his address, and once the Indian minister finished and left, the Pakistan minister made his entry. In 2020, Nepal again organised a virtual meeting of SAARC foreign ministers. In the meeting, Foreign Minister Gyawali 'urged the Member States to explore all viable options to hold the 19th Summit at an early date and to generate new momentum and dynamism in SAARC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

In all those meetings, Nepal's priority has always been on convincing the member countries to convene the stalled SAARC summit as soon as possible. As the Chair of SAARC and with Indian PM Modi, PM Oli could take the initiation to convince the former to hold the summit.

Today, PM Oli is in a unique position to talk to Modi that a more effective SAARC is not against India, but in the interest of all members, including India. On the contrary, resistance to strengthen SAARC risks not only SAARC but also India's pivotal role in South Asia in regional affairs, (Simkhada, 2018).

Nepal is utilising bilateral meetings with other member countries to create an environment for holding the SAARC summit. Speaking with foreign policy experts and journalists in the first week of January 2019 in New Delhi, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali strongly pitched for convening the SAARC summit, saying differences should be resolved through dialogue and the grouping should collectively deal with terrorism and other key challenges facing the region. Gyawali (2019) said, "If US President Trump and North Korea's Kim can meet, then why not (leaders of) other countries (Economic Times, Jan 11, 2019). It was a clear reference to India's refusal to sit with Pakistan for a summit-level meeting. This is not the first time that Nepal has stood for

convening the SAARC summits on a regular basis. Nepal faced a situation similar during 1999-2002.

Nepal has always opposed any move to postpone a summit citing Indo-Pak tension or a political situation in a member state. In 1999 while Nepal was serving as chair, it protested against India's decision to postpone the summit scheduled for November 1999 citing military takeover in Pakistan. In January 2002, Nepal successfully held the Eleventh SAARC Summit in Kathmandu.

India's push for BIMSTEC and Nepal's position

As Nepal and other member states are continuously pushing for the revival of SAARC, India is projecting BIMSTEC as an alternative to the regional body, but Nepal has consistently been insisting that BIMSTEC cannot replace SAARC. Both the initiations and gestures demonstrated by India clearly show that it wants to push BIMSTEC at the cost of SAARC though this has not been clearly stated in official meetings. After the indefinite postponement of the 19th Summit, there are worries about the fate of SAARC because India has pushed for BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC. For example, at the BRICS outreach programme held in October 2016, India had invited the heads of state and government from the BIMSTEC region.

In May 2019, during his swearing-in ceremony after being elected the prime minister for a second term, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited leaders from the BIMSTEC member states, which clearly signals India's shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC. However, Modi, during his first swearing-in in 2014, had invited the SAARC heads of government and states, including the prime minister of Pakistan.

Additionally, Indian government officials and policymakers are pushing BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC, but other countries are unwilling to accept this. Referring to BIMSTEC, which connects South Asia with Southeast Asia, Indian Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar in January 2020 said: "SAARC has certain problems and I think we all know what it is... even if you were to put the terrorism issue aside, there are connectivity and trade issues. If you look at why BIMSTEC leaders were invited for PM's swearing-in... we see energy, mindset and possibility in BIMSTEC" (The Economic Times, June 7, 2019).

These two examples clearly indicate India's preference for BIMSTEC over the SAARC process. More than that, policy briefs by government ministers and officials also clearly suggest that India wants to give up the SAARC process in favour of BIMSTEC. Not only government officials, even the think tanks and civil society in New Delhi are pushing for BIMSTEC as an alternative to

SAARC due to the Pakistan factor. Deliberations are also being held in New Delhi about a SAARC minus Pakistan.

Following the postponement of the SAARC summit, India has been holding many activities related to BIMSTEC. Since 2017, India has been convening the meeting of national security chiefs of the BIMSTEC region to collaborate on terrorism issues. Similarly, India held military drills of BIMSTEC countries in 2018, but Nepal declined, stating that it would not join any military exercise.

Despite India's disdain for SAARC, Nepal and other member countries have not given up their efforts to revive the SAARC process. Other member countries of SAARC say BIMSTEC cannot be a replacement as the two regional organisations have distinct identities and relevance. Along with Nepal, Bangladesh is coming out strongly to revive the SAARC process. In an interview, Bangladeshi Ambassador to Nepal Mashfee Binte Shams said:

“The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation is not a replacement for SAARC as the two regional bodies have different objectives and areas of operations.” “SAARC brings together the countries of the region that were closely integrated before the British came here and created artificial divisions. Before the British arrived, the region had many principalities and kingdoms, but we were integrated and there was a lot of internal trade. So, SAARC tries to revive that pre-British integration. Whereas BIMSTEC is about promoting trade between the two economic regions of ASEAN and South Asia. So one cannot replace the other” (Annapurna Express, February 14, 2020).

Scholars and experts are also maintaining that BIMSTEC cannot replace the SAARC as the two bodies were formed with different visions and by accommodating different geographies. Not only Bangladesh, when heads of state and heads of government of countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives visited New Delhi, they underscored the importance of reviving the SAARC process without any delay. In the case of Nepal, when our prime minister and foreign minister held bilateral talks with the member states, they stressed on the need to revive the SAARC process as the priority. While attending Modi's swearing-in in May 2019, Nepal's Prime Minister openly urged the member states to revive the SAARC process, a clear hint at India. “I don't want to talk about regional and other issues. But, as the Chair, Nepal wants to revive SAARC and make it effective again. Developing relations in the region is better than anything else,” (India Today, 2019).

At the BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli clearly mentioned SAARC to emphasise that BIMSTEC

could not replace it, which was very meaningful in the sense that such a statement came at a time when India was pushing for BIMSTEC over SAARC. PM Oli said: “Nepal stands for meaningful regional cooperation. We believe that SAARC and BIMSTEC do not substitute but complement each other. We are also committed to advancing sub-regional cooperation under BBIN” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Other heads of state or government of South Asian countries, however, made no mention of SAARC.

SAARC and Nepal

Nepal has had strong attachment to SAARC since its establishment as it sees regional organisations as platforms to engage with the outside world for economic development. With political stability at home, Nepal now aims to increase its engagements with international and regional organisations; hence, all the more importances of a regional body like SAARC for Nepal than in the past.

In the last three decades, SAARC's platform was helpful for Nepal to establish an independent identity in South Asia and beyond. Similarly, the SAARC platform was instrumental in enhancing access to Bangladesh. It provided a periodic platform for interacting with other countries as high-level exchange of visits with those countries is minimal. More than that, Nepal sees SAARC as a vital instrument for promoting regional cooperation. Nepal is also taking a lead in some areas of regional interests. At the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal played an active role to ‘initiate cooperation in the field of migration, cooperatives and social protection, featured for the first time in the SAARC agenda and reflected in the Declaration’.

“SAARC is a very important platform for Nepal to develop close relations with the neighbouring states. According to geographical location, SAARC is important for Nepal in terms of security, trade, development, tourism, problem of terrorism, etc. Nepal's economic interests are best served through regional cooperation. SAARC helps Nepal to decrease its dependence upon India, and this is possible only by enhancing its ties with the neighbours through SAARC. (Kumar, 2016). Nepal has, on many occasions, successfully utilised multilateral forums and the UN to neutralise and minimise the influence of neighbouring countries in its internal matters (Nayak 2014, p. 24-25).

Increasing regional trade through SAARC is another top priority of Nepal. Nepal along with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh pushed forward the idea of the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), which was signed in Dhaka on April 11, 1993. The objective of this agreement was to lay the

foundation for the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). One of the crucial benefits that Nepal can get from SAARC is expanding trade with other countries in the SAARC region.

The SAPTA agreement provided a framework and institutional basis for trade liberalisation and economic cooperation between the SAARC member countries. SAPTA categorised SAARC member countries into Least Developing Countries (LDCs), namely Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, and non-LDCs- India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The agreement provided special and differential treatment to the LDCs by the non-LDCs. This was about providing deeper and wider tariff preferences. SAPTA was the first step towards SAFTA. The concept of SAFTA was mooted at the 11th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2004, and it was signed at the Islamabad Summit in 2006.

SAFTA is beneficial to Nepal due to multiple reasons. Nepali policymakers had reasons to believe that joining SAFTA would be helpful for Nepal to expand its exports to countries other than India, collectively called “Rest of South Asia” (RSA), and thereby contribute to geographic export diversification (Kumar, 2016, p. 4). However, Nepal’s foreign trade continues to be concentrated with India, with which it has a bilateral preferential trade agreement since 1950.

While Bangladesh has emerged as Nepal’s third largest export market globally, the growth in exports is overwhelmingly due to the surge in exports of a single agricultural commodity, lentils. Through SAFTA, Nepal can expand its export to Bangladesh and other countries. Energy cooperation is another area which Nepal can benefit from SAARC. The sub-regional body, BBIN, is mulling over energy cooperation between Nepal, India and Bangladesh.

Due to climate change, Nepal’s Himalayan region is witnessing a fast melting of snow, which needs to be highlighted at regional and international platforms. The melting of snow not only impacts Nepal but also the entire region. So through SAARC, Nepal can garner the support of other countries to mitigate the effects of climate change in the Himalayas. Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have huge potentials for hydropower. If these three countries export electricity to other member countries, it will reduce the use of fossil fuel in the region and ultimately help to ameliorate the adverse impact of climate change. Similarly, India has made remarkable progress in solar energy. Other countries could share India’s knowledge and technology in this field.

Push for sub-regional framework under SAARC

Not only SAARC, Nepal is pressing for sub-regional cooperation among like-minded parties within the broader framework of SAARC. In order to avoid dependence on its neighbours, regional tensions and hiccups to development,

Nepal proposed a move towards sub-regional cooperation (Thapaliya, 2014-2015, pp. 117-127,). In the meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers held in 1996, Nepal had proposed sub-regional cooperation among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

Nepal's initiative was endorsed by the regional actors at the SAARC Summit in the Maldives in 1997. Subsequently, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal requested the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for assistance in facilitating their economic cooperation initiative. This request led to the implementation of the South Asian Sub regional Economic Cooperation (Thapaliya, 2014-2015, pp. 117-127). Despite Nepal's push for sub-regionalism, it did not move ahead as expected.

In 2015, however, a pact was signed among the four member states of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) that allowed their cargo and passenger vehicles to operate in each other's territory without having to clear customs at the border. However, Bhutan's main opposition and transporters are opposed to the pact for fear that that such free movement will increase pollution and affect its tourism and the local culture besides ultimately affecting the country's sovereignty. The sub-regional BBIN cooperation has not moved ahead due to the internal opposition in Bhutan.

Nepal is also taking initiatives to expand the areas of cooperation under the broader framework of SAARC. Nepal is making efforts to set up a network of SAARC parliamentarians. The International Relations and Labour Committee of the Legislature-Parliament of Nepal convened the 'Regional Conference on SAARC Effectiveness' in Kathmandu on September 29-30, 2016. Chairpersons of the Parliamentary Committees dealing with SAARC affairs from all the member states had attended the conference.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, SAARC cannot be revitalised until and unless there is a thaw in the relationship between India and Pakistan. Additionally, India as the largest member country in terms of size, population and resources has a key role in making SAARC a vibrant regional organisation. If India is genuinely committed to regionalism and connectivity, it should not choose BIMSTEC over SAARC; instead it should push for the growth of both organisations simultaneously.

Also, other member states-Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan and Bhutan-must persuade India and Pakistan to have them agree on holding summit-level meetings regularly by putting aside their bilateral differences. As the Chair of SAARC, Nepal has an even bigger role

to persuade the two countries, but the experience of the last four years shows that Nepal's efforts alone will not yield much; other member countries should also strongly back Nepal's efforts. Instead of supporting the position taken by India, as in 2016 when the decision to cancel the Islamabad Summit was taken, all countries should take a strong and independent position in favour of holding the summit, and they must raise this issue with India and Pakistan at bilateral meetings.

Similarly, small countries should increase their say in the SAARC process instead of depending too much on India for funds and other logistics. For instance, soon after the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took up the leadership to organise a video conference, an initiative that could have been taken by the smaller countries. At times of crisis, even small countries should come forward to take the lead.

Notably, the small countries of South Asia should abandon the tendency of perceiving India as a big brother or see SAARC as a mechanism by India to advance its hegemony in the region. Countries, especially Pakistan and also some other countries, should abandon such a mindset and become ready to cooperate on connectivity and other projects initiated by India.

At the same time, small countries should increase their budgetary contribution to SAARC, which is facing resource constraints to implement projects, and not rely heavily on India for resources. Unforgettably, all countries should seriously take measures to tackle terrorism and not allow their soil for breeding terrorist activities. Most importantly, the current efforts made by Nepal to revive the SAARC process are not sufficient. Nepal as SAARC's Chair should present itself confidently and talk with India and other member countries about hosting the SAARC summit.

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