



## ANALYZING SAARC THROUGH THE PRISM OF INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIPS

**Showkat Ahmad Bhat**

Ph.D Candidate,

Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir.



### ABSTRACT

The attempts for cooperation of the countries of South Asia became successful when seven countries of South Asia formally launched the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in December 1985 with the specific aim of promoting regional economic cooperation for development among the member countries-Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It must be clarified that the initial name South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) was abandoned in favor of the name South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This was done to specify that it is an association for the promotion of regional cooperation among the South Asian countries. Afghanistan became SAARC's eighth member on 4<sup>th</sup> April in 2007. The very aim of SAARC has been to promote regional cooperation among the South Asian countries. At the sixth SAARC summit, the leaders tried to realize this aim by agreeing to remove trade hindrances for evolving SAARC into a collective economy. Nonetheless, to implement this into a fact seen a far dream. The reason is political differences among member countries particularly between the two major SAARC members-India and Pakistan. Pakistan always thinks in terms of equality with India and wants to keep India limited and does not hesitate to create troubles for India. The example has been furnished by its attempt to raise the Kashmir issue in SAARC summits for keeping limited the SAARC aim of increased economic cooperation in South Asia. Until 2020, the SAARC has held 18<sup>th</sup> summits and the 19<sup>th</sup> summit was scheduled to be held in Islamabad (Pakistan) on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> November 2016 but was postponed due to terror attack in Kashmir Uri sector. This paper focuses on SAARC from the perspective of India-Pakistan relationship. Why did India and Pakistan join SAARC? How they have used the SAARC forum to advance their bilateral differences? How far is India and Pakistan sincere about their regional commitments? Did SAARC in any way influence India and Pakistan? The paper attempts to answer these questions and in doing so aims to understand the dynamics of the relationship of India and Pakistan with SAARC.

**KEY WORDS:** SAARC, cooperation, India, Pakistan, summits, Kashmir, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

The South Asian Association for regional cooperation came as culmination of the initiative taken by Bangladesh on May 02; 1980. This was only in August 1983 that the foreign ministers of the seven member countries meeting at Delhi and adopted the 'Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC).' But Bangladesh undertook a detailed analysis of the geopolitical and socio-economic situation of the region and its conclusions helped pave the way for the formal launching of SAARC in December 1985 at Dhaka (Bangladesh) and the first summit of seven SAARC members was held. It must be clarified that the initial name South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) was abandoned in favour of the name South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The Delhi declaration of South Asian Cooperation listed the following aims of the SARC.

1. To promote welfare of the people of South Asia and improve quality of their life.
2. To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potential;
3. To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia.
4. To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciations of one another's problems;
5. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
6. To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
7. To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interest; and
8. To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

The declaration further affirmed that cooperation in respect of the above-mentioned rights shall be based on the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of other countries and mutual benefits. It also identified eleven areas of possible cooperation among the South Asian countries like agriculture, rural development, communication, meteorology, health, population activities, transport, postal services, scientific and technological cooperation etc. Besides these, the cost of the projects and programmes for which sufficient financial resources could not be mobilized within the region; external help could be procured from other regional or other appropriate sources with the approval of the standing committee. Till 2020, the SAARC has held 18<sup>th</sup> summits and the 19<sup>th</sup> summit was scheduled to be held in Islamabad (Pakistan) on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> November 2016 but was postponed due to terror attack in Kashmir Uri sector.

## INDIA

India is territorially the biggest, population-wise the largest, development-wise, technologically and industrially the most developed country of the South Asia. India has played and continues to play a big role in the successful implementation of SAARC programmes for cooperation and development among the member countries. India has accepted SAARC as a voluntarily organized association of sovereign equal countries for consolidating and expanding regional cooperation for development. India firmly believes that SAARC spirit can help the countries of South Asia to develop and to resolve their bilateral issues outside the SAARC platform. In the second SAARC summit held in India and lasted for two day and reaffirmed the commitment of the members to expand and strengthen regional cooperation as well as to devise common policies and approaches for finding solutions to their common problems. In the eighth SAARC summit held in India 1995. It called for an international convention, prohibiting the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances and strongly deplored the rising wave of terrorism in Asia and elsewhere. The 10<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was held in Sri Lanka in July 1998 in the background of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998. Yet the summit focused on such issues like economic development of South Asia, regional economic integration, cooperation for development and progress from South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) to South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). After the summit a joint declaration was made in which it was recorded that all nuclear powers should work for securing an effective nuclear disarmament and the position of South Asia should not be viewed in isolation. The fact that the major nuclear powers were merely talking of disarmament even while maintain huge stockpile of weapons was strongly criticized. It was held that NPT and CTBT neither have neither checked nuclear proliferation nor made any progress towards nuclear disarmament. The only way for securing nuclear non-proliferation was to adopt a global level time-bound nuclear disarmament plan. Though the summit did not make any direct reference to the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan, the strains present in India-Pakistan relations kept the environment of SAARC summit conditioned. The 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was held at Islamabad (Pakistan). The summit condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and noted that the people of South Asia were facing a serious threat from this scourge. Terrorism violates the fundamental values of the

UNO and the SAARC charter and constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security. SAARC countries reaffirmed their commitments to the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. The 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was actually held in the background of emerging India-Pakistan friendship and cooperation for developing all dimensions of their bilateral relations as well as for maintaining the new peace approach. The 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit ended on a very positive note and it constituted an important step towards the promotion and strengthening of SAARC cooperation towards SAFTA as well as for meeting the challenge being posed by the menace of terrorism. However all previous summits, this SAARC summit used pleasant, rational and sound words in favour of rapid and comprehensive socio-economic-cultural development of the people of South Asia. But there was no initiation of concrete steps for securing SAFTA and eliminating terrorism. Pakistan maintained its policy of not giving India Most Favoured Nation status, India-Pakistan trade and economic cooperation continued to remain limited as before. With the passage of time Kashmir and terrorism became more sensitive between India and Pakistan. The 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2016 but postponed by India with support of other SAARC member countries owing to terror attack in Kashmir at Uri sector where several India soldiers killed.

The suicide attack in Pulwama district at Kashmir were 40 Indian soldiers killed. The attack once again has raised tension between India and Pakistan. The current chair of SAARC-Nepal has emphasized both India and Pakistan to maintain control. The SAARC countries were the first to condemn the Pulwama terror attack. Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli called Prime Minister Narendra Modi to condemn the terrorist attack as Nepal's foreign office in a statement "strongly" condemned the "heinous act." Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wikremesinghe "strongly condemn" the brutal terrorist attack. In a letter to External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, the Maldivian foreign minister Abdulla Shahid conveyed his country's commitment to fight against terrorism and to work closely with India and the international community in eliminating this global menace. Bhutan's foreign minister in a statement posted on Twitter strongly condemned the attack and expressed solidarity with the government of India. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina extended support to India to fight terror jointly after the Pulwama attack. Afghanistan "strongly" condemned the terrorist attack and stressed the need for "closer cooperation of countries in the fight against this common enemy." As tension increased between India and Pakistan after the downing of a fighter jet each following the Pulwama attack, concerns shifted to regional peace and stability. "As the current Chair of SAARC, Nepal... called on India and Pakistan to exercise utmost restraint and not engage in actions that would threaten peace and security in South Asia," Nepal's ministry of foreign affairs stated and urged both sides to "seek solution through dialogue and peaceful means in order to ease tension and normalize the situation for peace and stability in South Asia." Other SAARC nations echoed Nepal's concerns. Sri Lankan's foreign office in a statement "strongly supports peace and stability in the South Asia region" and urged India and Pakistan to diffuse tensions through dialogue to ensure peace and stability of the entire region. Similarly, the Maldives urged India and Pakistan "to exercise utmost restraint, and to preserve the stability, peace and security in the region" and stressed the need for speedy resolution through diplomacy and dialogue. There is a strong regional dimension in these statements emphasizing the implications of India-Pakistan conflict on South Asia and stressing the need for peaceful solution through dialogue and diplomacy. There has not been any proposal for the regional organization to play a role in the India and Pakistan conflict relations. This is understandable, particularly when the parties in conflict are the two biggest and most powerful members of the organization. Largely viewed as a 'failure' in promoting regional cooperation, the inability to make progress is, in turn, attributed to the unending hostility between India and Pakistan. India-Pakistan conflict has long defined the boundary of South Asia's security dynamics. Far from playing a role in inter-state conflict, the SAARC as a regional organization has stayed away from crisis in member countries because the SAARC Charter bars discussion on contentious bilateral issues but outside SAARC can discuss on bilateral issues.<sup>1</sup>In spite of SAARC is continue to work and play its role as recently making a strong pitch or SAARC

nations to jointly combat corona virus-originated in China's Wuhan city, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed setting up a COVID-19 emergency fund with India committing US\$10 million initially for it, and asserted that the best way to deal with the pandemic is by coming together and not growing apart. Apart from India, other SAARC nations welcomed the proposal.<sup>2</sup>

## PAKISTAN

Pakistan particularly had joined SAARC with more apprehension rather than expectation. Pakistan used the opportunity for fulfilling its foreign policy aims with regard to India. SAARC's numerous meetings, including the summits provided an opportunity for Pakistan to develop closer ties with all the member countries which would not have been otherwise possible. The SAARC platform has facilitated a continuous and constant interaction with the other member countries of the Association. SAARC gave Pakistan a chance to use grievances of other countries against India to justify its anti-India stand. This Pakistan position against India was strained and would not allow interaction at the bilateral level without drawing severe criticism from certain domestic quarters. However, the same criticism is toned down to a certain extent when the interaction takes place at a regional level through a regional framework in the name of a regional organization like SAARC. This helped to moderate Pakistan's views on co-operation with India and other member countries and a section of the intelligentsia there has been able to appreciate this interaction. Pakistan was initially apprehensive of joining the regional association for two reasons-first, the feeling hegemony of India over the region's countries. Second, Pakistan's deeper involvement in the South Asia might cast a doubt on credibility and seriousness of its efforts to develop closer ties with the Islamic countries of West Asia. Pakistan finally decided to join the forum because it was unwilling to isolate itself regionally. Pakistan thought that the regional advantage of joining in SAARC is to prevent India vis-à-vis other South Asian countries. Thus being inside the forum it could prevent India from assuming hegemony. Pakistan President, General Zia before the first SAARC summit in 1985, said that Pakistan's participation in the summit would not in any way affect its relations with the Muslim countries. It would maintain its national identity at all costs and continue to play a positive role in the Middle East. Since Pakistan enjoyed an important place in the South Asia as well as in the Western Asia. He emphasized that Pakistan would continue its policy of friendly relations with other countries of the world without compromising its ideology, independence and integrity. Regional co-operation, he said, was not a new phenomenon and such alliances existed in almost all the regions of the world. He said, "We are determined to follow our policies as an ideological state and realize fully our responsibilities with regard to our independence and integrity."<sup>3</sup>

The clarifications that it would maintain its identity etc stems from its suspicions of the forum and with regard to the role India would be playing. Pakistan was telling its friends in West Asia that its joining the regional association will not lead to its abandoning responsibilities towards them nor would closer relations with them be diluted. The President also made comments regarding economic co-operation. He said, Pakistan would maintain its pace of development in the economic field despite co-operation with SAARC countries and hoped that it would strengthen Pakistan's economic relations with other countries of the region. The regional association had no security ideology or military connotation and was basically for the peaceful exploitation of the economic and technical resources of the member countries for the welfare of the people. However none of the seven countries could be enjoying tension free relations with New Delhi. Specifying that of all the differences is the India-Pakistan relations that had kept political temperatures high and were not conducive to regional co-operation. While discussing India-Pakistan relations ranging from the Kashmir issue to India's concerns of Pakistan's nuclear programme and the induction of sophisticated weapons. Pakistan was not prepared to concede hegemony by surrender of its independent policies,

---

<sup>3</sup> See, Padmaja Murthy, Associate Fellow, IDSA "Pakistan and SAARC".

compromising its security and sovereignty. Thus, the key to any broader arrangement for co-existence in the region first lay with India and Pakistan for establishing good relations and resolving their differences. One of the major foreign policy aims of Pakistan is to have parity with India in all respects, specifically to attain a bargaining position on the issue over Kashmir. Pakistan says that the Kashmir issue is central to its relations with India. Pakistan has never lost an opportunity to raise the issue at various international forum, contrary to the policy of India which has preferred to settle all issues in a bilateral forum as agreed upon by both the countries in the Shimla Agreement (1972). Pakistan has never raised the Kashmir issue directly in the official SAARC summit level meetings. According to the SAARC Charter, bilateral relations cannot be raised but Pakistan has adhered to it in letter, since there are many international fora where bilateral issues are not to be raised but Pakistan has violated them to raise the Kashmir issue. But in SAARC the issue comes into focus without anybody raising it. It is a small grouping unlike other international fora and consists of only eight members with India and Pakistan's bilateral issues after dominating more than the association's activities. The summit meetings of SAARC seem the appropriate place for the two countries to meet and discuss issues. When they meet, naturally the focus automatically shifts to Kashmir issue. The summit meetings of SAARC have provided an opportunity for dialogue to be held between both India and Pakistan.

At the very first summit meeting at Dhaka in 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Zia met informally and discussed bilateral issues. This was followed by a bilateral visit to India by Gen.Zia where the discussions continued. Prior to the second SAARC summit held in Bangalore, India, in November 1986, the air was tense in the sub-continent. This was to do with reports that India had moved its troops in the western borders and was preparing to attack Pakistan. Responding to these reports, leaders in Pakistan said that they were prepared to face any eventuality and that the armed forces were fully alive to the situation. They held that though the troop movement on either side of the borders was not an abnormal situation, this time the troop movement on the India side was very heavy which had no parallel. Against this background, the whole gamut of Indo-Pak relations was discussed by the press and the academia. President Zia then conveyed that the situation in *Siachen glacier* could be described as a stalemate. He also said that Pakistan was being unjustly blamed for the situation in Punjab. Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan on his way to Bangalore to attend the summit said that there was no immediate possibility for removal of tension between India and Pakistan. He however said that availing of the opportunity of the SAARC conference, "we will review the situation." Commenting on the effect of these events on the SAARC summit, a Pakistani newspaper wrote that, "India cannot go to war on the eve of the second SAARC summit but the deployment will certainly cast a shadow on it-and this could be intended. South Asian nations living in India's neighborhood wish to engage India in a process of normalization through SAARC projects working as a guarantee against hostile intent. But India has its intents on other objectives. The summit also provided an opportunity for the foreign ministers of both countries to meet and review the developments in their relations since President Zia and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had met in December the previous year in Dhaka and later, in India in 1985. They discussed trade and the reports of concentration of Indian troops on Pakistan borders. On November 14, prior to the summit, Pakistan Foreign Secretary, Mr. Abdul Sattar declared that his country would be very happy to sign the Non-proliferation Treaty the same day that India did so. He further said that Pakistan was prepared to accept any bilateral, regional or global non-discriminatory inspection system to satisfy one and all that Pakistan's nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes.

Pakistan has suggested that steps to banish nuclear weapons should be spelt out by the SAARC forum and that a collective pledge renouncing the threat, or use of force, against one another should be taken by the members. Since all the countries favour arms limitation and are opposed to nuclear weapons, the same should be said in clear terms. On its part, Pakistan has expressed its willingness to join a meaningful dialogue in this direction. During the 1987 summit in Kathmandu it had proposed that the members could consider a regional agreement placing a comprehensive ban on nuclear explosion tests, since none of the countries had said that they intended to produce such weapons. It had also proposed that



countries should consider ways of limiting arms expenditure and seek regional solutions for curbing the arms race and the danger of nuclear proliferation and war. Thus Pakistan raised in the summit the concept of South Asia nuclear free zone. Pakistan has claimed that the common commitment to the United Nations Charter and the Non-aligned Movement provided a sound basis for the consolidation of good neighbourly relations. Pakistan maintains that constant interaction, promoting meaningful contacts, and disseminating greater knowledge about each other would lead to better mutual understanding. Pakistan stresses that South Asia should agree to notify one another on significant troop's movement. That can invite observers when the movements exceed an agreed threshold. Pakistan welcomed the move to broadcast simultaneously from all the SAARC capitals the inauguration of the summit in 1987 held in Kathmandu (Nepal). These programmes would disseminate information, bridge the communication gap and dispel the fog of ignorance. Pakistan agreed that the decision to exempt Supreme court judges and members of the national parliament from visa requirements for travel within the region was a positive step. Thus Pakistan considers the introduction of the SAARC Travel Document as an achievement.<sup>4</sup> At the fourth SAARC summit in Islamabad in 1988 that it expressed in detail its views on the economic aspect of co-operation. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto stated that the region being home to one fifth of the humanity, constituted a vast internal market for goods and services of every kind and the region had the potential to become one of the great centers of economic power in the world. However, the global economic environment was not conducive to the rapid development of the poorer countries. Further, the North-South dialogue aimed at attaining equilibrium and justice in international economic relations had been deadlocked for too long. However an important element of the global economic reform was greater South-South co-operation. In this context it was opined that co-operation under SAARC was of vital importance and that it assumed an international dimension.<sup>5</sup> The sixth SAARC held at Colombo (Sri Lanka) in 1991 welcomed the general trend towards disarmament. Pakistan suggested that along with this, a regime for ensuring that the South Asia remains free of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. At the 1991 summit, Pakistan stated that peace and stability was necessary for economic and social progress. That lasting peace could be assured if the member states abide by the principles of the UN charter, fulfill the commitments undertaken by the members bilaterally and internationally and settle the disputes peacefully on the basis of justice and fair play.<sup>6</sup> In seventh SAARC summit held in Dhaka (Bangladesh) in 1993, Pakistan again stated that SAARC can play an effective role when the member states resolve all outstanding issues. At the summit, Pakistan welcomed and endorsed the objectives of SAPTA. It stated that trade and economic co-operation should form the bedrock for any organization for regional co-operation. It stated that resource constraint was the main hurdle on the key issues of financial resources and technology transfer. It hoped that the South Asian Development Fund would finance studies for projects that are of common interest.<sup>7</sup> Pakistan was of the view that the South Asian countries, acting in concert, could exercise a collective influence far greater than the sum of their individual contributions. That successful regional co-operation could serve to inhibit great power rivalry and restrain their action in South Asia and the adjacent regions of the world. In this way South Asia could make vital contribution to international peace and security, and assist in the emergence of a more equitable political and economic order in the world. It suggested that the SAARC Secretariat should establish contact with the ASEAN Secretariat and discuss the modalities by which the two associations could benefit from each other's experience.<sup>8</sup> At the eighth SAARC summit in 1995 held at New Delhi, Pakistan was represented by President Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari, who came out quite openly, "The fact is that our association has not taken off. The suspicious and insecurity generated by the unsettled political issues in our region stand in the way of SAARC moving forward at the pace that it should be." He suggested that the

---

<sup>4</sup> See the third SAARC Summit-The Kathmandu Summit-1987.

<sup>5</sup> Benazir Bhutto, Address at the inaugural session of the fourth SAARC Summit in Islamabad, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> See the sixth SAARC Summit.

<sup>7</sup> See, Seventh SAARC Summit.

<sup>8</sup> See, *Padmaja Murthy, Associate Fellow, IDSA "Pakistan and SAARC"*

member states of SAARC should use the platform of the association in order to collectively help narrow the political differences between members. He seemed to suggest a change in the charter so that contentious political issues could be resolved, as the charter clearly states that such issues are not to be raised.<sup>9</sup> The ninth SAARC Summit in 1997 laid emphasis on the formation of a South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA). However, it was at the Tenth SAARC summit in Colombo that Pakistan put forward a detailed proposal entitled Peace, Security and Development. The proposal had three aspects to it for resolving contentious issues. First, there should be a sincere bilateral dialogue. Second, in case the dialogue fails, a high council comprising of SAARC Foreign Ministers would examine the causes of tension that threaten regional peace and if need be, they could mediate for a reconciliation. The last concerns the convening of South Asian Security and Development Conference to discuss issues of peace, security and economic development. This, the proposal held, would lead to an agreement on renunciation of the threat or use of force for peaceful settlement of disputes.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan has reiterated its belief in terrorism being a problem which warrants co-operation. It has stated its condemnation of all acts of violence against innocent people. Pakistan has declared itself open to cooperation in any form and at any level among the SAARC countries to eliminate the threat of terrorism. Thus, it welcomed the conclusion of SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. This, it felt proclaimed the firm commitment of the governments of the SAARC countries to give no quarter to anyone charged of terrorism in any South Asian country. Stating in very clear terms it said that the member countries must not permit the abuse of their territory as a sanctuary for launching platform by criminals to perpetrate heinous acts in other states. It expressed that the use of terrorism for the achievement of political aims was a concern which it shared with all countries of the region.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan has expressed its resolute support for a concerted SAARC strategy on the drug problem and categorically stated that there was no place for those engaged in the illicit production and trafficking of drugs. Pakistan had said that it was honoured to be appointed as the first co-ordinator of the technical committee on prevention of drug trafficking and drug abuse. It stressed that the country was participating in a global campaign to tackle this problem, since Pakistan wanted to eliminate illegal production of opium, to wipe out trafficking, to deter the criminal, to treat the victim. It considered the SAARC Convention on Drug Control signed in 1990 at the Male summit as an important milestone in the evolution of regional co-operation.<sup>12</sup> At the tenth SAARC summit in Colombo, the situation had changed with both the countries having conducted nuclear tests two months prior to the summit.<sup>13</sup> The success of SAARC largely depends on the ability of India and Pakistan to have a normal relationship with each other.

## CONCLUSION

The SAARC is bound to be weak as long as SAARC countries particularly India and Pakistan do not really come out of their biases owing to their unresolved issues which hamper progress of the SAARC platform. The biases have to be removed through bilateral as well as regional level confidence building measures, concrete action plans and only then would emerge a real opportunity of the realization of SAARC spirit and objectives. The purpose for establishing a SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) needs to be fulfilled in a business-like spirit and only then it can be of some value. Otherwise, it is bound to be a pious declaration like many other declarations that the SAARC leaders had adopted in their meetings. Accordingly, the title of the paper SAARC and India-Pakistan suggests that India and Pakistan must work together to find ways and means which may help to pave the way for make the SAARC cooperation a success in practice.

---

<sup>9</sup> See, Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari, Address at the inaugural session of the seventh SAARC summit, New Delhi, 1985,

<sup>10</sup> The Hindu, August 3, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> See, Padmaja Murthy, Associate Fellow, IDSA "Pakistan and SAARC"

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The Hindu, July 29, 1998.