

SAARC: An Impasse?

'Some 200 meetings take place every year among SAARC countries but these meetings are not matched by results'¹

Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) came into existence on 8th December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with a number of objectives aimed to improve and develop the region as a whole.² However, SAARC over the last 25 years has achieved very little and has been relegated as an organisation of little value, both within and outside the region. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the other hand, in a neighbouring region, has achieved significant growth through regional cooperation between ten developing economies. During a period where the world is adopting a multilateral regional approach to development, the SAARC is yet to become effective enough to drive economic prosperity and play a meaningful role in reducing inter-state tensions in the region.³

This paper will appraise the SAARC, to identify the barriers and impediments which prevent the organisation from achieving its true potential and being as successful as some other regional organisations. The paper will conclude with a recommended approach, for its SAARC member states, which might help the organisation, to not only achieve its objectives, but also present itself as a viable and effective regional organisation.

¹ Jigmy Y. Thinley, Premier of Bhutan and the current chair of SAARC, while addressing the 16th SAARC Summit, held in Bhutan, from 28 to 29 April 2010, see SD Muni, 'SAARC at Twenty Five', *Institute of South Asian Studies (National University of Singapore)*, Brief No. 160, 04 May 2010, p. 2, retrieved 02 May 2011, <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_160_-_Email_-_SAARC_at_Twenty_Five_04052010182800.pdf>; Mahendra Ved, 'South Asian Cooperation – SAARC can do better', 20 May 2010 (no page numbers given), retrieved 10 March 2011 (copy held with author), <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/tag/saarc/>>.

² Dhirendra Dwivedi, *SAARC: Problems and Prospects*, Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2008, p. 1.

³ SG Pandian, 'Moving South Asia's economies beyond the Indo-Pakistan paradigm in the South Asian Regional Association for Cooperation', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2002, p. 329, retrieved 09 March 2011, <<http://sga.myweb.uga.edu/readings/SAARC%20beyond%20Indo-Pak.pdf>>.

What has SAARC achieved?

South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka is home to 1.47 billion people;⁴ one-fifth of the world's population (see Figure 1). Within this area, almost half of the population lives below the poverty line, making it one of the poorest regions of the world.⁵ A vast majority of the people are illiterate, without access to proper health facilities and suffer from many negative social factors. Considering the region's social, economic and political problems, the SAARC was conceived as a regional organisation which could alleviate problems and put individual states on the path to growth.

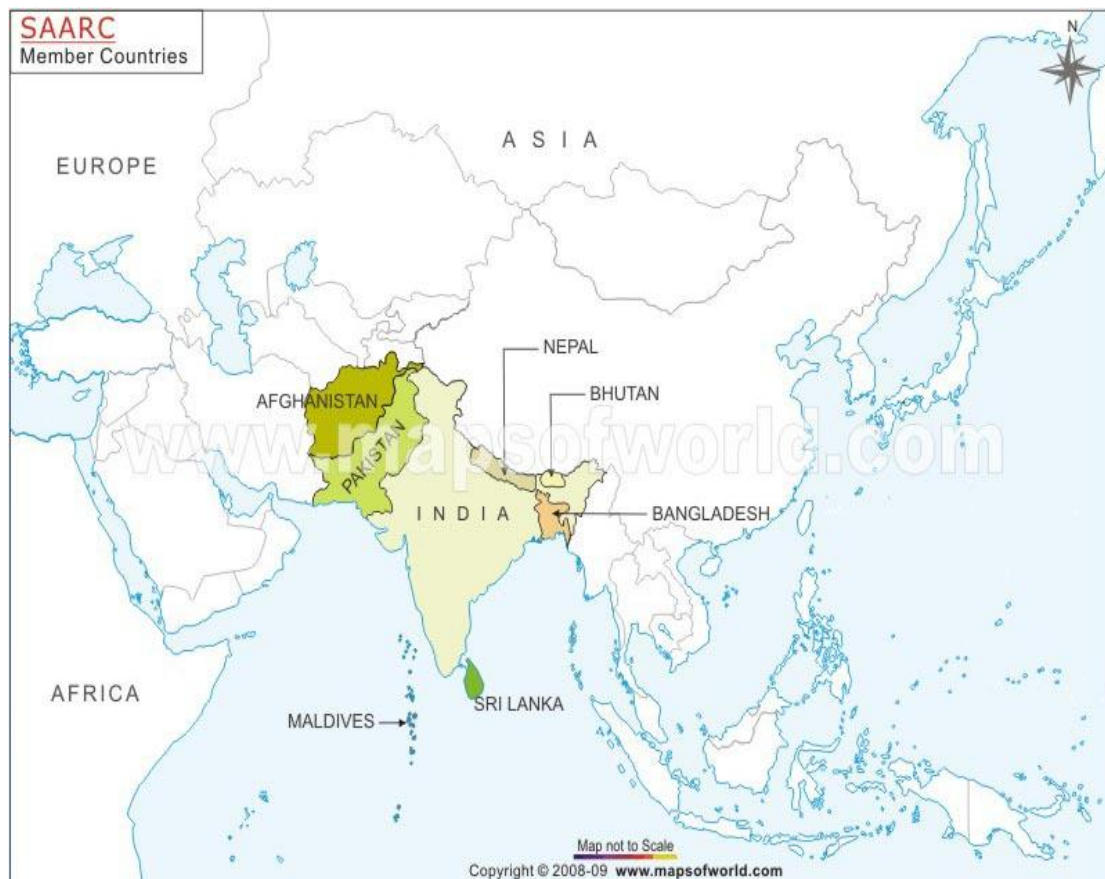


Figure 1: Map showing countries forming SAARC⁶

⁴ Dwivedi, p. 1.

⁵ Ved, Mahendra, 'South Asian Cooperation –SAARC can do better'.

⁶ Map showing SAARC member states, retrieved 01 May 2011, <<http://www.mapsofworld.com/saarc-member-countries.htm>>.

Although member states, realising the benefits gained from regional cooperation, have been meeting regularly at various levels, the SAARC is seen as a failure by many analysts.⁷ During this 25 year period there have been no notable SAARC achievements, although marginal progress has been made in a few fields.⁸ Dr. Christopher Snedden, of Deakin University, states that, ‘the fact that SAARC has existed since 1985 is an achievement in itself.’⁹ The regional security environment has deteriorated due to the growth of terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the non resolution of inter-state disputes. Growth in the social and economic sectors has also been dismal.¹⁰ The SAARC accounts for less than one percent of the world trade.¹¹ Intra-regional trade has also been an insignificant four percent of its total trade.¹² Most of the conventions and summits become photo opportunities for attendees.¹³ In the words of Bishwa Pradhan, former Foreign Secretary of Nepal, ‘many of the decisions are just in papers in the form of protocols, conventions, reports and studies’.¹⁴

⁷ Smruti S. Pattanaik, ‘SAARC at Twenty-Five: An Incredible Idea Still in its Infancy’, *Strategic Analysis (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses)*, Vol. 34, No. 5, September 2010, p. 671; Sumita Kumar, ‘Pakistan and Regionalism’, *Strategic Analysis (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses)*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January-March 2006, p. 123; Padmaja Murthy, ‘Relevance of SAARC’, *Strategic Analysis (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses)*, Vol. 23, No. 10, January 2000, p. 1, retrieved 29 March 2011, <www.ciaonet.org/olj/sa/sa_00mup01.html>.

⁸ AKM Abdus Sabur & Mohammad Humayun Kabir, *Conflict Management and Sub Regional Co-operation in ASEAN: Relevance for SAARC*, Academic Press and Publishers Limited in association with Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka, 2000, pp. 78-79.

⁹ Christopher Snedden, ‘Some thoughts about the South Asian region’, 12 June 2010 (no page numbers given), retrieved 10 March 2011 (copy held with the author), <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/tag/saarc/>>.

¹⁰ Amar Nath Ram, ‘SAARC in a Globalised Era – Imperatives and Opportunities’, *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4, September 2009, pp. 448-449, retrieved 28 March 2011, <<http://iqq.sagepub.com/content/65/4/441>>.

¹¹ Abhishek Raman, ‘South Asian Union Divided We Stand’, *Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, New Delhi*, Vol. 78, July 2008, p. 2, retrieved 28 April 2011, <www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/1396774642IB78-Abhishek-SAARC.pdf>.

¹² For example, the intra-regional trade is 62 percent for the European Union, 55 percent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and 35 percent for the ASEAN, see Raman, p. 2; Rajshree Jetly, ‘Conflict management strategies in ASEAN: perspectives for SAARC’, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2003, pp. 65-66, retrieved 02 May 2011, <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a713707114>>.

¹³ Pattanaik, ‘SAARC at Twenty-Five’, p. 671.

¹⁴ Bishwa Pradhan, ‘Regional Cooperation: Prospect for Energy Development’, *Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nepal*, p. 9, retrieved 20 March 2011, <www.ifa.org.np/document/saarcpapers/bishwa.pdf>.

What are the barriers to the SAARC moving forward?

The SAARC Charter states that the Heads of States/Governments must meet once a year, however, they have met only 16 times in the past 25 years.¹⁵ Postponement or failure to conduct summits has been attributed to Indo-Pakistan tensions¹⁶ and other reasons, some of which are insignificant.¹⁷ However, irregular conduct of summits is not the only reason for the lacklustre performance of SAARC.

India and SAARC

In South Asia, India accounts for 72 percent of the total area, 77 percent of the population and 78 percent of the regional Gross National Product.¹⁸ India, given its size and centrality in the region, shares a land or maritime boundary with all the SAARC countries, thus making it the pre-eminent power in the region and able to influence the conduct of other member states (see Figure 1 and Table 1).¹⁹ The other member states, with the exception of Pakistan and Afghanistan, do not share boundaries with each other, or have India as their only neighbour (see Figure 1).²⁰ The geographical uniqueness and its rapid economic growth makes India stand out as a logical driver for the success of the SAARC.²¹ However, the influence of India on the

¹⁵ Summits were not held in 1989, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2009, see Snedden, 'Some thoughts about the South Asian region'.

¹⁶ For instance, the 11th SAARC Summit scheduled to be held in 1999 was convened after three years in 2002, due to Indian unwillingness to share a forum with Pakistan, and legitimise its military regime and General Pervez Musharraf, who masterminded the Kargil operation, see Kripa Sridharan, 'Regional Organisations and Conflict Management: Comparing ASEAN and SAARC', *Crisis States Research Centre (Destin Development Studies Institute)*, Working Paper Series No. 2, No. 33, March 2008, p. 8; Snedden, 'Some thoughts about the South Asian region'.

¹⁷ Shveta Dhaliwal, *Development of Regionalism in South Asia: Some Reflections on SAARC*, MD Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2009, p. 32.

¹⁸ Bharti Chibber, *Regional Security and Regional Cooperation: Comparative Study of ASEAN and SAARC*, New Century Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p. 96; Sabur & Kabir, p. 51.

¹⁹ Dwivedi, p. 71; Afghanistan does not share a direct land boundary with India. However, India considers Afghanistan as a direct neighbour since it considers the Pakistan occupation of Northern areas of Jammu and Kashmir, which borders Afghanistan, as illegal, see Kanwal Sibal, 'India's Relations with its Neighbours', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2009, p. 352, retrieved 28 March 2011, <<http://iqq.sagepub.com/content/65/4/351>>.

²⁰ Vikas Kumar, 'Why is SAARC gridlocked and how can it be revitalized', 19 January 2011 (no page numbers given), retrieved 30 March 2011 (copy held with author), <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/tag/saarc/>>.

²¹ KV Rajan, 'Renewing SAARC', *Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nepal*, p. 1, retrieved 27 April 2011, <www.ifa.org.np/document/saarcpapers/rajan.pdf>; Tomislav Delinic, 'SAARC-25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia', *KAS (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung) International Reports, New Delhi*, No. 2/2011, p. 9, retrieved 03 May 2011, <www.kas.de/saarc/en/publications/22415/>.

region has been described as hegemonic and has led to a sense of insecurity amongst smaller nations.²²

Country	Population (2011)	Area (Sq Km)	GDP in US \$ (purchasing power parity) (2010)	GDP growth rate (2010)
Afghanistan	29.8 million	652,230	29.81 billion	8.9 %
Bangladesh	158.6 million	143,998	259.3 billion	6 %
Bhutan	0.7 million	38,394	3.5 billion	6.8 %
India	1.2 billion	3,287,263	4.046 trillion	8.3 %
Maldives	0.4 million	298	1.8 billion	4 %
Nepal	29.4 million	147,351	35.31 billion	3.5 %
Pakistan	187.3 million	796,095	451.2 billion	2.7%
Sri Lanka	21.3 million	65,610	104.7 billion	6.9 %

Table 1: Selected Development Indicators of SAARC Members²³

India is also a constant factor in most of the inter-state disputes within the region, some attributable to the colonial past.²⁴ India has a range of issues with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka including sharing of waters and borders, illegal migration, trade and transit relations, and perceptions of inappropriate Indian interference in the internal affairs of others.²⁵ There are other inter-state conflicts too which do not involve India, but these are less significant compared to those involving India.²⁶

²² Kumar, 'Why is SAARC gridlocked'; Murthy, p. 3; Jetly, p. 64.

²³ 'The World Factbook', *Central Intelligence Agency*, retrieved 05 May 2011, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html>>.

²⁴ Sridharan, p. 8; Sabur & Kabir, pp. 75-78.

²⁵ Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy & David M. Malone, 'India and its South Asian Neighbours', *Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore (NUS)*, Working Paper No. 100, 26 November 2009, pp. 15-23, retrieved 29 March 2011,

<http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Working_Paper_100_Email_India_and_its_South_Asian_Neighbours_27042010105547.pdf>; Jetly, p. 62; Sabur & Kabir, pp.65-67; M. Manir Hossain & Ronald C. Duncan, 'The political economy of regionalism in South Asia', *National Centre for Developmental Studies, The Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies*, Economic Division Working Paper No. 98/1, 1998, p. 8, retrieved 01 May 2011, <<https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/40287/3/sa98-1.pdf>>; Dwivedi, p. 106; Sridharan, p. 8.

²⁶ For instance, Bhutan has a dispute with Nepal regarding the acceptance of ethnic Nepalese who fled Bhutan into Nepal in 1990; Pakistan and Bangladesh have a dispute, in relation to the sharing of common assets and repatriation of Pakistanis who were stranded in 1971 when Bangladesh was created, see Sabur & Kabir, pp. 74-76; Hossain & Duncan, p. 8; Sridharan, p. 9.

Strained Indo-Pakistan relations is, 'the most severe obstacle to regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC'.²⁷ The Kashmir issue and Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism continue to underscore the brittle relationship between India and Pakistan which seriously impedes the SAARC growth.²⁸ Pakistan has consistent involvement in undermining India's leadership role in the region.²⁹ Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed, while addressing the last Summit, in a direct reference, blamed India and Pakistan for making the SAARC non-functional.³⁰ Similarly, Jigme Thinley, Bhutan's Prime Minister, in his opening address at the same Summit stated that, 'fractious and quarrelsome neighbours do not make a prosperous community'.³¹

India considers that the SAARC provides an opportunity to the smaller nations to collectively oppose its interests.³² Some nations of the region have forged ties with China to balance the influence of India.³³ Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan's initiative in campaigning for China's entry into the SAARC, as an observer, is viewed by India as an attempt to marginalise its influence in the region.³⁴ The indifferent attitude of the smaller nations towards India, besides dampening the spirit of SAARC, vitiates the environment for India and makes it reluctant to take on leadership within the region.³⁵ Suspicion and mistrust amongst the member states, 'serve as a stumbling

²⁷ Sabur & Kabir, p. 53.

²⁸ Smruti S. Pattanaik, 'Indo-Pak Relations and the SAARC Summits', *Strategic Analysis (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses)*, Vol. 28, No. 3, July-September 2004, p. 429; Chaturvedy & Malone, p. 13;

Syeda Sana Rahman, 'Same but Different? Comparing the ASEAN and SAARC Frameworks', *Institute of South Asian Studies (National University of Singapore)*, Brief No. 123, 07 March 2011, p. 10, retrieved 02 May 2011,

<http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/Working_Paper_123-Email-Same_But_Different-Comparing_the_ASEAN_&_SAARC_Frameworks_07032011201128.pdf>.

²⁹ Sibal, p. 354; Kumar, p. 130; Chibber, pp. 301-302.

³⁰ President Mohamed Nasheed, President of Maldives, while addressing the 16th SAARC Summit, held at Bhutan, from 28 to 29 April 2011, retrieved 01 May 2011, <www.sixteenthsaarcsummit.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/maldives.pdf>; Snedden, 'Some thoughts about the South Asian region'; Poorna Rodrigo, 'Analysis & Opinion: President Nasheed's no nonsense SAARC speech', *Asian Tribune*, 30 April 2010, retrieved 10 March 2011, <<http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/04/30/analysis-opinion-president-nasheed%E2%80%99s-no-nonsense-saarc-speech>>.

³¹ Snedden, 'Some thoughts about the South Asian region'.

³² Delinic, p. 10; Rajan, p. 1; Murthy, p. 2.

³³ Smruti S Pattnaik, 'Making Sense of Regional Cooperation: SAARC at Twenty', *Strategic Analysis (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses)*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January-March 2006, p. 155, retrieved 09 March 2011; Chibber, p.97; Sabur & Kabir, p. 55; Chaturvedy & Malone, p. 23.

³⁴ Pattanaik, 'SAARC at Twenty-Five', p. 675.

³⁵ Pattnaik, 'Making Sense of regional cooperation: SAARC at Twenty', p. 156.

block in the way of moving towards substantive areas of cooperation within the framework of SAARC'.³⁶

Self-centeredness

Unlike the spirit of ASEAN which has been famously encapsulated, in the, 'ASEAN way', the SAARC member states hold differing views on most of the important issues, lack strong and common political will and have very little consensus about basic norms, rules and agreements.³⁷ The SAARC member states are self-centred in their approach and have done very little to promote a regional outlook. Most of the member countries, including India, engage more with Western countries or inter-regional organisations than they do within the region.³⁸ The speeches made by state leaders during the last Summit highlighted their achievements as individual nations and included very little in describing their participation in regional events. Though they did underscore the importance of regional cooperation, they did not address any specific initiative to move the SAARC forward.³⁹ Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, during the same Summit said, 'we often tend to provide priority to our engagements with extra-regional actors, without devoting sufficient attention to further developing and strengthening links within our own regional organisation.'⁴⁰ It has also been observed that all member states prefer bilateral communication rather than adopting a SAARC-led regional approach, even in those issues for which regional provisions/declarations exist.⁴¹

³⁶ Sabur & Kabir, p. 79.

³⁷ Sridharan, p. 13.

³⁸ Pattanaik, 'SAARC at Twenty-Five', p. 672.

³⁹ Pattanaik, 'SAARC at Twenty-Five', p. 672.

⁴⁰ Janaka Alahapperuma, 'President Rajapakse's Speech at SAARC', 29 April 2011, retrieved 02 May 2011, <www.infolanka.com/news/IL/1360.htm>; Pattanaik, 'SAARC at Twenty-Five', p. 673.

⁴¹ For example, the SAARC has a Disaster Management Centre in New Delhi, approved during the 13th Summit in Dhaka in November, 2005. However, the response of individual states to the Pakistan floods of 2010 illustrates the bilateral outlook of SAARC members. India offered \$5 million, Bangladesh \$ 2 million, Nepal \$1.3 million and Afghanistan offered \$1 million as aid to Pakistan's flood victims. Sri Lanka sent relief material and doctors to help flood victims. It is significant that the disastrous floods in Pakistan, which occurred in July and August, 2010, were just a few months after the 16th Summit of SAARC, at which the state leaders drove home the point that the regional organisation was ineffective, but when a opportunity came for a regional effort, all of them failed to rise to the occasion, see Smruti S. Pattnaik, 'Time to Redeem SAARC', *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, 20 August 2010 (no page numbers given), retrieved 04 May 2011, <http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/TimeToRedeemSAARC_sspattanaik_200810>.

Western Outlook

Though the SAARC has granted observer status to the European Union and eight other countries,⁴² the West still looks at South Asia as two entities: ‘Western South Asia’, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and ‘Eastern South Asia’ which includes the other countries.⁴³ The West attaches significant importance to the former due to the US-led involvement in the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ (GWOT) and its relationship with India, considered a rising power. On the other hand ‘Eastern South Asia’, is considered as a less significant region for the West, as it offers very little of economic or strategic interest. After the defeat of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the process of Maoist soldiers being re-integrated into Nepalese society, there are no major political issues of concern to the West.⁴⁴ The SAARC, therefore, does not enjoy the same level of Western support as ASEAN and other regional organisations.

Can the SAARC be revitalised?

Environment Conducive to Cooperation

Being the biggest and most influential member nation, India must appreciate that by its not taking the lead, the SAARC will never achieve its full potential. India also needs to recognise the benefits of maintaining good relations with its neighbours and resolving contentious issues with them. The Indian government needs to display magnanimity, without compromising its national interests, to settle all issues with its neighbours on terms that smaller nations will find attractive.⁴⁵ India needs to take positive steps to change the hegemonic attitude it is seen as having in the region.

In order to remove deep rooted mistrust, smaller nations will also need to play their part in the resolution of all contentious issues, thereby bringing stability in the region. Pakistan and India, in particular, should seek to resolve their differences, if the SAARC is to be effective.⁴⁶ Smaller nations must be accommodative of India’s regional and global aspirations,⁴⁷ and they must view India as an opportunity for

⁴² Australia, China, Iran, Japan, Mauritius, Myanmar, Republic of Korea, USA and European Union have become observers of the SAARC, see Delinic, p. 18.

⁴³ Snedden, ‘Some thoughts about the South Asian region’.

⁴⁴ Snedden, ‘Some thoughts about the South Asian region’.

⁴⁵ Ram, p. 444.

⁴⁶ Pandian, p. 342.

⁴⁷ Sabur & Kabir, p. 93.

economic growth, and development of their human resource capabilities, in particular in the field of information technology.⁴⁸ Improving bilateral relations with China may be acceptable to India; however any attempt to balance or reduce Indian influence in the region will not be welcomed by India. An environment, free of mutual mistrust and suspicion; conducive to cooperation, and with India as leading member, would help the SAARC to grow.

Sub-regional Approach

Working towards sub-regional cooperation on common themes will help develop harmonious relations among member states, thus helping the SAARC to realise its true potential.⁴⁹ Steps to physically integrate the region will help increase trade and improve economic relations, which besides increasing regional inter-dependence and bringing prosperity to the sub-region, underscores the importance of stability and resolution of inter-state disputes.⁵⁰ Efforts to create social linkages at sub-regional level in the fields of education, poverty alleviation, health, science and technology and tourism will bring direct benefits to the populace, thus spreading the SAARC awareness and strengthening the organisation.⁵¹ Eric Gonsalves, a former Secretary in the Government of India, has said, that ‘...in South Asia almost no effort is devoted to advertising the genuine benefits that would accrue to every citizen from regionalisation, this needs to be remedied...’⁵² The importance of communicating the potential benefits of SAARC, within and outside the region, cannot be overstated.

International Image

By improving inter-state relations and adopting a multilateral approach, the SAARC can project itself as a united entity, thus improving its international image. Active engagement with the observer countries will attract foreign investment and other support which will boost development within the region.⁵³ India, having established itself in the world, should take the lead in showcasing the SAARC achievements while engaging with the West. Initiatives such as laying a network of gas pipelines in

⁴⁸ Rajan, p. 5; Ram, p. 446.

⁴⁹ Chibber, p. 376; Pattnaik, ‘Making Sense of regional cooperation: SAARC at Twenty’, p. 156.

⁵⁰ Sabur & Kabir, p. 168.

⁵¹ Ram, p. 445.

⁵² Chibber, p. 215.

⁵³ Mavara Inayat, ‘The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation’, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, Policy Paper No. 15, February 2007, p. 24, copy held by the author.

the region can help project the SAARC as the 'Asian Gas Grid',⁵⁴ thus promoting itself as a useful organisation.⁵⁵ Greater interaction with ASEAN and the adoption of relevant lessons from its success will go a long way in helping SAARC's cause and put it on the path of progress.⁵⁶

Conclusion

An examination of key drivers, the environment and major influences reveal a potentially optimistic future for SAARC. The paper appraises SAARC to identify the impediments to its efficient functioning. This paper recommends a number of plausible options that will contribute to the vitalisation of SAARC.

The SAARC has been in existence for 25 years. However, it has yet to make a mark as a viable regional organisation and achieve its true potential. Insecurity on the part of smaller nations regarding India; mistrust among the member nations; unpleasant Indo-Pakistan relations; the self-centred attitude of member states; and feeble Western support are the major barriers to the SAARC's progress.

The need for India and other member states to work for a relevant role for the SAARC in the development of South Asia is beyond debate. India, given its size and influence, must play a more meaningful role in injecting life into the SAARC. Resolving contentious issues amongst member states will help remove mistrust and create an environment conducive to growth. All member states must shun a bilateral approach in favour of a regional outlook to maximise gains. The SAARC projecting itself as a united and an effective organisation will cause the world to take notice and help it grow like other regional organisations.

⁵⁴ South Asia has common borders, on one side, with Central and West Asia, major energy producing regions, and on the other, with South East Asia and China, major energy consumers.

⁵⁵ Rajan, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Jetly, p. 72; Chibber, pp. 214-215; for additional reading and detailed comparison between SAARC and ASEAN, refer Sabur & Kabir, and Chibber.

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