



**India and South Asian Regionalism:
A Study of India's Response to the Needs, Demands and Expectations of Smaller States***

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Abstract:

Regionalism generally flourishes around a big power, or a core member state, deemed to be superior than other members in terms of its size, population, military power, level of industrial development, economic resources, and advanced administrative and political system. If its ruling elites are appropriately "responsive" to the needs, demands, and expectation of other members, it can "serve as a center of attention" for leadership of less developed partners in a regional cooperative arrangement. Relying on this theoretical underpinning, this paper aims to survey the needs, demands and expectations of smaller regional countries (SRCs) towards India, the core member in SAARC. It also intends to evaluate and analyze Indian stance on South Asian regionalism and response to the expectations and concerns of others members. The research is qualitative and analytical for which both primary and secondary sources have been used. Besides the available books, scholarly articles and research reports etc., the primary data, i.e. speeches of the leaders of member countries delivered at the SAARC summits, have been utilized. Thematic analysis method has been used to generate patterns, make generalizations, and draw conclusions.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, SAARC, South Asian regionalism, expectations, political disputes

INTRODUCTION

The experience of regional arrangements shows several factors that help promote the process. These factors include: geographical proximity, political, economic and social similarities, common threat perception and strategic harmony, similar foreign policy outlook and objectives, and shared functional interests and consensus on the role of core member (Mohla 1988, 288). There also exist some prerequisites for success of regional arrangements which included: presence of open channels of communications, acceptance of sovereign equality of all members, governmental effectiveness, supportive regional and international political environment, consensus on regional approach and strategy to address common problems, and expectations of equitable political and

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economic benefits (Khan 1991, 43; Cheema 1989, 117; Rizvi 1991, 198). Far more important is the restraint behaviour on the part of major partners as well as adherence to an ideology of internationalism that can contribute to regional peace, stability, progress and prosperity through maintaining a “balance between regional authority and regional responsibility” (Narain & Upreti, 1991, 3; Kizilbash 1991, 118-21; Khan 1991, 50-2).

Many experts and leaders feared that geographical, demographic, political, military and economic disparities in the context of ideological, religious and ethnic differences compounded by Indian central position and its bilateral disputes with all neighbours as well as history of coercive diplomacy and aggressive policies towards its neighbours could pose “major impediment” to the growth of regionalism. Thus, it was suggested that the SAARC members, particularly India, needed to draw lessons from other such organizations (Naqvi 1991, 189; Chose 1992, 116-8; de Silva 1999, 274-6; Jha 2004, 118). For instance, President Zia of Pakistan had once told about his conversation with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in these words:

I reminded Mrs. Gandhi of the success of ASEAN and asked her if I could tell her a story. (I said that) when I met President Suharto of Indonesia some time back, I asked him to give me one solid reason for ASEAN progress. He told me, ‘Indonesia, being the largest partner, has deliberately played a very docile role. That is why ASEAN has been a success.’ I added, ‘Mrs. Gandhi, I leave the rest unsaid’ (Devies & Kerns 1983).

This paper aims to survey the needs, demands and expectations of smaller regional countries (SRCs) towards India, the core member in SAARC. It also intends to evaluate and analyze Indian stance on South Asian regionalism and response to the expectations and concerns of others members. The research is qualitative and analytical for which both primary and secondary sources have been used. Besides the available books, scholarly articles and research reports etc, the primary data, i.e. speeches of the leaders of member countries delivered at the SAARC summits, have been utilized. Thematic analysis method has been used to generate patterns, make generalizations, and draw conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature suggests that smaller regional states had a lot of expectations from India. Narain and Upreti (1991) observed that regional groupings where some members had played “a more domineering role” could not realize the fruits of regionalism. Thus, Thornton (1991) asserted that India must give “greater care and attention” to the concerns and sensitivities of the smaller states and pursue a mode of “regional leadership” which could be acceptable to them. Likewise, Mohla (1998) argued that India’s role “should be pre-eminent and not pre-dominant.”

Notwithstanding the ground realities and existing asymmetries in the region, India was advised to adopt a “restrained behaviour” and accept “equality of status” of all members (Kizilbash 1991). The experience of EU and ASEAN showed that a close partnership between Germany and France and between Indonesia and Malaysia, respectively, had played a vital role in their success (Wallace 1986). Particularly, Germany and Indonesia had played a key role by renouncing the use of force and converting their traditional adversaries into a relationship of constructive partnership. Therefore, India was advised to treat her neighbours particularly Pakistan as an equal partner to make SAARC successful. An amicable solution of bilateral problems between them could definitely bring an end to mutual distrust and occasional tensions which was essential for the growth of

regionalism. The members could contain undue external influences in the region through evolving a mechanism to resolve political problems and bilateral disputes and create mutual economic interdependence. They could also learn a lesson from ASEAN experiences regarding conflict management through bilateral, unofficial and ASEAN channels (Sabur 2003).

India was expected to show a spirit of maximum accommodation, magnanimity and large-heartedness in its dealing with smaller states. It was expected to harmonize its national interests with those of its co-members and provide them an assurance of its sincerity and goodwill towards growth of regionalism (Harrison 1991; Naqash 1994). It needed to readjust its attitude towards smaller states and help evolve collective “political purposes and approaches” to global issues (Naqvi 1991). Indian policy towards its neighbours could even get guidance by the “advice” New Delhi rendered to the superpowers on international issues. On its part, several measures, such as those taken by the Janata regime (1977 – 1979), could mend the situation (Bokhari 1985). Even India was expected to make some sacrifice to foster development in the region so that its neighbours could realize that India was “doing something for them.” India being the largest and most resourceful regional state could afford “to be the giver rather than taker in the region; If India gave, the neighbours would give too.” In short, the people and leaders of SRCs had “so many diverse expectations” from India (Sharan 1991; Gupta, Gupta, & Handa 1989; Muni 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Both transactionalists and neofunctionalists noted that regionalism flourished around a big power. Deutsch and associates observed that “security communities tend to develop around cores of strength” The potential ‘core area’ required for promotion of integration must be superior in terms of “economic growth with advanced techniques of political decision-making, administration, and defense.” If its ruling elites are “sufficiently responsive,” it can “serve as a center of attention for less developed and weaker neighboring elites.” He defined responsiveness as member states’ capacity “to respond to each other’s needs, messages and actions quickly, adequately, and without resort to violence.” It required presence of appropriate means of communication, mutual trust and sympathy, positive attitude and shared interests to create the necessary “will to respond.” It also requires the core state, as from other states, to denounce the use or threat of use of force in its dealings with smaller states, and demonstrate its commitment to peaceful resolution of mutual disputes. Haas also observed that differences in size and power “may spur integration in some economic and military task-setting if the ‘core area’ can provide special payoffs” or if the smaller members, have a political objective to “control the ‘core area’,” e.g. OAS (Ahmad, 2013).

The leading state has to take the responsibility of making regionalism successful by addressing the fears and concerns of smaller states through adopting a restraint and responsible behaviour. It also has to ensure equitable distribution of the gains of regional cooperation through generating development impulses in smaller states, making short term sacrifices, and even playing the role of a paymaster in the grouping. Nevertheless, confidence in national capabilities, domestic pressures and favourable international environment may induce a core state to pursue independent course of action and take slight or insignificant interest in promoting regionalism (Ahmad, 2013).

NEEDS, DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE SMALLER MEMBERS

Unlike other regional groupings, no external factor had contributed to the creation of SAARC. Rather, the security, political and economic concerns of the SRCs forced them to take the initiative to create SAARC. These concerns were, more or less related with India's policies in the region. The SRCs confronted four kinds of security concerns; security of regimes; security against one-power hegemony; security against the super-powers' interference; and security against nuclear weapons and arms race (Kizilbash 1991, 129-35). The growing terrorist activities, such as those observed in Sri Lanka and Maldives in 1980s, were also perceived as a challenge to members' security. They were also concerned over environmental degradation, particularly the rise in the sea level which has threatened the very existence of some members. The SRCs also had some political objectives; they wanted to get autonomy against India and to contain its hegemonic and expansionist policies; and to face it on equal basis at a regional forum under a framework that can help them resolve their bilateral disputes with India in accordance with international law (Kapur 1991, 43-4; Jha 2004, 114). They also wanted to pace up their economic growth and social development. Being less developed, they needed some special measures as well as mechanism to balance diverse interests of all members (Narain & Upreti 1991, 3; Jha 2004, 1). It required that big members must harmonize their interests with those of SRCs and help foster economic interdependence to ensure equitable distribution of benefits. The smaller states wanted that cooperation process must be based on the "firm belief that the good of all presupposes the good of each" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 186). Due to the interdependence of regional states, no single state of them could be prosperous if its partners were not so (Sharan 1991, 111-2). Moreover, the smaller states had hoped that it was only through regional unity they could have "an effective voice in international forums" (Government of Bangladesh, 1980).

An analysis of the speeches of leaders of the SRCs at SAARC summits suggests that they needed a regional forum which could help them realize their strategic, political and economic objectives, such as peace, security, political autonomy, economic independence, progress and prosperity, as well as to discuss all issues of common concern, i.e. global, regional or bilateral, in a friendly environment (SAARC Secretariat, 1990, 33, 74-5; Ahmad 2016). They wanted to put more attention and greater care to give SAARC the future shape, capacity and direction which would ultimately determine its "viability" in the long run (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 64-5, 83).

The SRCs wanted to use SAARC to dispel mutual suspicions, distrust, fears and anxieties and help create harmonious relations among its members. It could lead to better understanding of each other's needs, aspirations and perceptions (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 6; Government of Bangladesh 1980). Regional cooperation, said President Ershad, should be "based on and conditioned to, mutual trust and understanding" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 166-7). President Jayewardene said: "There can be no successful regional cooperation without mutual confidence, without mutual trust" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 27). There could be no meaningful cooperation among regional states until the peoples' hearts and minds meet together (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 186). President Gayoom stressed that "a high degree of understanding" among members was essential to make SAARC successful (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 67-8). Mutual trust, goodwill and understanding could be built only through "sympathetic appreciation of each country's legitimate national aspirations" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 166-7). Junejo explained it in these words: "The hallmark of goodwill is

mutual sensitivity to one another's problems and feelings. We should behave towards neighbours as we would like them to behave towards us, refrain from actions that we want them to eschew" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 126). King of Bhutan called on all members "to transcend the narrow nationalism" and establish a new inter-state relationship in which "the magnanimity" of big members must be matched by the "genuine friendship" of others (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 12-3).

Regional Political Environment and Growth of Regionalism in South Asia

The SRCs believed that regional cooperation would not be easy due to vast differences in size, resources, capabilities, development level and political clout compounded by divergent religious, political and strategic ideologies, and prevalence of political disputes, mistrust and rivalries among members (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 12 and 126). King of Bhutan said that regional cooperation would "not be easy" in South Asia due to prevailing "political and strategic divergences and asymmetries in ... sizes, resources, and levels of development" in the region (SAARC Secretariat 1990). Junejo once said: "Geography alone cannot compel cooperation. History, unfortunately, provides ample proof of that truism. Moreover, disparities of size and resources and apprehensions rooted in the past cannot be considered as positive factors" (SAARC Secretariat 1990). To overcome these difficulties, regional political environment must be improved to influence the cooperation process and ultimately the effectiveness of SAARC (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 63, 115-6 and 128). King of Bhutan argued, "it may neither be possible nor desirable to limit discussions in our meetings to issues of non-political nature, for the political climate of our region will undoubtedly cast a long shadow over our deliberations." King Wangchuck further added: "In the geopolitical realities of our region, it would be unrealistic to ignore the primacy of the political factor, as, in the final analysis, it will be the political environment of the region which will determine the shape and scope of regional cooperation in South Asia. The main obstacle is not only to overcome the psychological and emotional barriers of the past, but the fears, anxieties, and apprehensions of the present" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 12-3).

The SRCs had the conviction that resolution of bilateral problems and political disputes was essential to make SAARC successful. In fact, regional political environment could only be improved through making progress on bilateral relations, and building trust among members which needed removal of inter-state tensions and resolution of political problems and bilateral disputes among members (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 63, 67-8, 83, 115-6, 128, 171 and 191). Prime Minister Bhutto highlighted that unresolved political "disputes, mutual suspicions and rivalries" had divided the regional states in the past and would "keep them from coming together whole-heartedly in joint endeavours" (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 164-5). Junejo also emphasised upon the members to overcome the political obstacles and to not hesitate from taking "constructive initiatives to strengthen peace and cooperation" among them. "We should not hesitate to discuss matters which may obstruct or block the fountains of creativity and growth," he argued (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 126).

Believing that the regional political environment would be "the most important factor for the success of" SAARC, the leaders of SRCs time and again stressed the need of adopting a two prong approach. On one hand, it is the responsibility of the leaders of all members to take "bold and farsighted bilateral initiatives to build lasting peace and stability" in South Asia. On the other side, they argued, "SAARC too, can and must play a more positive and effective role in improving the

political climate of South Asia” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 171). They wanted that SAARC should serve as a regional forum to discuss and address bilateral disputes and other contentious issues under a regional framework to generate “a spirit of friendship” and mutual understanding among its members. It could create a political environment congenial for the growth of regionalism and also provide SAARC a sound foundation and solid structure that could “stand the test of time.” Only then, regional cooperation could contribute significantly to the socio-economic development as well as forge unity in South Asia (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 63, 67-8, 83, 115-6, and 128). In both cases, the personal attitude, political will and commitment of respected leaders of all members was thought to be a vital and “decisive factor” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 13, 64-5, 171, and 191). The Indian leadership owed the largest responsibility. President Jayewardene made this point more profound when he said: “Firstly we must trust each other, India the largest in every way; larger than all the rest of us combined, can by deeds and words create the confidence among us so necessary to make a beginning. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi is its chosen leader; on him we rest our hopes. He must not fail us. He cannot” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 26-7).

Regional political disputes were, in fact, India’s bilateral disputes with its neighbours including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Ahmed 2005, 6-26). Mostly they were related to water resources such as sharing or distribution of water etc. (Gill 2005, 12-26). A few of them had severe bearing on security and economy of smaller states and put adverse effects on interstate relations that could impede growth of regionalism in South Asia. Therefore, resolution of these disputes depended largely on the commitment of Indian leadership.

India’s role was crucial for the success of SAARC in several other respects too. Its positive attitude could contribute to regional peace, security and stability that was important to speed up the pace of industrialization and economic development in the entire region. To this end, SRCs expected India to show true respect for their territorial integrity and “scrupulous observance of the principles of sovereign equality” of all members. It was also expected to demonstrate “a larger vision,” farsightedness, understanding, fairness, magnanimity, and “a spirit of give and take” that could cultivate and foster the spirit of cooperation (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 22, 69-70, 108, and 183). Most importantly, they wanted practical steps rather than rhetoric. King of Nepal highlighted it in these words: “our deeds must match our words. In the end, it is the result that counts far more than words or seminars. Surely, we cannot talk tall and then deliver so little” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 107).

The resolution of political problems and bilateral disputes could bring enormous benefits to all members and to the people of South Asia. It could help remove tensions in the region and dispel mutual mistrust and suspicions that could lead to harmony and tranquility in inter-state relations among SAARC members. It would, in turn, contribute to regional peace and security that would pave the way for economic cooperation and progress and prosperity in the region. Friendly and tension free relations among SAARC members would help build broader regional agreements and consensus on different issues of common concern at various forums boosting the image of regional states and giving them more say at the world level (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 18, 23-4). It could leave little room for any foreign involvement in regional politics. Most importantly, it could also help reduce defense expenditures and save the much needed money, being used on arms buildup, for utilization on socio-economic development. All these factors in combination could help lay a

strong foundation over which higher level of regional cooperation would be made possible. The SRCs wanted to create, what Deutsch had termed, a pluralistic security community. It comes into being when states in a region agree to “forgo the use of violence” and show their inclination towards settlement of their disputes through peaceful means. Hashmi described it as the essential condition and first level of integration upon which prospects of further progress depends. Once the members renounce the use of force among them, it transforms their relations from those characterized by competition to that of cooperation. It provides a “psychological infrastructure” for regional cooperation that creates a sense of oneness or “we feeling” manifested in amity and friendship among members. In return, it promotes mutual responsiveness, appreciation of each other’s needs and problems and also increases social and economic transactions among them (Hashmi 1979, 26-9; Naazer, 2020).

The desire of the SRCs to create a security community is also reflected in various proposals they made from time to time. For instance, Katmandu in order to get a legal status and international guarantee to its political independence had proposed a resolution at the UN General Assembly to declare Nepal a zone of peace in 1960s. It got worldwide support but India had opposed it (Upreti 2003, 263-4). Sri Lanka had moved a resolution in the UN to declare Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace (IOZOP) in 1971 (Mcperson 2002, 258; Gooneratne 2007, 54). Pakistan had proposed India a joint defence pact in 1959 and no war pact in 1981 (Makeig 1987, 285-8). Such arrangements had already proved their utility in others parts of the world (Naik 1999, 336-43). However, none of these proposals could be realized due to Indian opposition to them.

India’s Response

Indian response was apparently encouraging for SRCs. For instance, Indian Foreign Minister had stated that regional cooperation would not only “give us confidence in ourselves and contribute to our well-being but will also enable us to contribute effectively to peace and progress through the world.” He further stated that SAARC members had “realized that friendly political relations in the region must go hand in hand with cooperation in the economic, social and cultural fields. Indeed, the two are mutually reinforcing” (SAARC Secretariat 1988, 62). Furthermore, while addressing to the inaugural session of the first summit, Indian premier stated: “India welcomes the diversity of our region. We affirm the sovereign equality of the seven States of South Asia. We have much to learn from one another and much to give. We have a profound faith in peaceful co-existence. We are confident we share these beliefs with all our partners in the region.” He also cited a statement of Nehru who while addressing the Asian Relation Conference in New Delhi in 1947, had stated, “We meet together, we hold together, we advance together.” Gandhi stated that regional cooperation in South Asia was “an important step towards realizing the larger Asian consciousness” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 15-6). Gandhi had also stated:

“Certainly we have problems and difficulties and these do impose constraints on us. Enduring cooperation is cooperation adapted to the realities of our condition. The model we have evolved for ourselves is a model which is in accord with our realities, our compulsions and our genius. We have not sought to melt our bilateral relationships into a common regional identity, but rather to fit South Asian cooperation into our respective foreign policies as an additional dimension. We have evolved modalities which do not allow bilateral stresses and strains to impinge on regional cooperation” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 16).

Notwithstanding these assertions, Indian leadership consistently opposed the idea of discussion of bilateral disputes at SAARC meetings. It argued that regional cooperation in various areas would help regional states to come out of these problems. For instance, Gandhi had said:

Bilateral relations have their difficult moments. SAARC reminds us that at such moments we should seek what unites us and not what divides. We have consciously decided not to burden SAARC with our bilateral concerns. Yet, by providing a framework for forging a cooperative set of relations among our countries, SAARC can help us positively in growing out of these problems (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 55).

Thus, Indian leadership ignored the fact that successful formation of a true regional community required its members to mitigate and minimize mutual conflicts so that the interests unifying them could overshadow the factors dividing them (Hussain 1996, 18). Indian leaders also believed that concerns of smaller states were just imaginary and psychological and there was a need to overcome these “psychological barriers.” Gandhi had elaborated it in these words: “If we play with shadows and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by apprehensions, cooperation in development will remain a mirage” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 176). He also stressed the importance of removal of barriers to cooperation which he believed would help in “paving the way towards the dismantlement of the rest. The most important of these barriers are the psychological barriers.” He had, therefore, called upon the need of “opening of closed doors.” He further elaborated that these were “the windows of the mind that first need uncurtaining” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 193).

Thus, Indian leadership consistently demonstrated that it was not interested in some of the more important demands of smaller states. India was not willing to accept the demands of the SRCs with regard to providing SAARC with some framework for discussion of political disputes and contentious issues. Indian leadership consistently opposed these proposals and demands of smaller states as manifested in the speeches of their leaders delivered at various SAARC meetings. For instance, Gandhi once stated that regional cooperation in South Asia “tempers enthusiasm with pragmatism, and initiative with consensus. At the same time, in the light of our experience of the recent past, we have every reason to hope that the practice of regional cooperation will have a beneficial impact on bilateral relationships” (SAARC Secretariat 1990, 16).

Had Indian leadership accepted the demand of SRCs to include discussion of political problems and contentious issues in SAARC charter and to resolve their bilateral disputes under a regional framework, the overall political environment of South Asia as well as the fate of regionalism could have been different. The example of ASEAN is self-explanatory where members initially focused more on security and political aspects of their cooperation and put the organization on a solid foundation. Albeit the expectations of smaller states and the political benefits that it could bring, none of Indian leaders accepted the demand to address political problems under SAARC framework.

Informal Discussions at the Eve of SAARC Summits

Since India did not accept the demand of the SRCs to provide for discussion of political problems and contentious relations between the member states under SAARC framework, SAARC members were left with two options. First, to deliberate these issues during their informal meetings at the sidelines of SAARC summits etc. and; second, to discuss their mutual problems at the bilateral level.

The history of SAARC shows the discussions during informal meetings at the sidelines of SAARC summits proved highly useful in improving bilateral relations and improving overall political environment of the region (Naazer 2018-b). However, the full potential of the informal meetings on the sidelines of SAARC summit could not be exploited due to frequent delay and postponement of these meetings. This cancellation phenomenon has more been attributed to or caused by Indian policy and behaviour. The summit meeting could not be held since 2014 again due to Indian refusal to attend it in Pakistan (Naazer, 2017).

India's Bilateral Moves to Improve Relations with its Neighbours

India undertook several bilateral moves to address its bilateral disputes with smaller states. The Janata Party rule (1977-79) had the credit of initiating efforts and taking some measures to improve India's relations with its neighbours which probably encouraged them to strive towards creating SAARC. India had improved its relations with Pakistan and also signed an agreement on water sharing with Bangladesh during this period.

But India reverted back to previous policies with the change of government and return of Indira Gandhi to power. Later in 1988-89, Rajiv Gandhi halfheartedly and therefore, unsuccessfully tried to improve India's relations with Pakistan. During this period, India's bilateral relations worsened with Sri Lanka and Nepal. In 1990, the new government under the leadership of V.P. Singh and then Chandra Shekhar also sought to improve India's relations with its neighbours and to address mutual political problems particularly with Nepal and Sri Lanka (Hagerty 1991, 362). India also gave some concessions to Nepal and signed trade and transit treaties with it in 1990 which were amended in 1993. It also allowed Nepal a transit route through Bangladesh. The most important initiatives to this end were made during the mid-1990s, including signing of treaties with Nepal and Bangladesh (Banerji 1999, 43).

Gujral Doctrine

In mid-1990s, India's efforts to improve relations with SRCs and resultant conclusion of treaties were the outcome mainly of the Gujral Doctrine. It prescribed normal and friction free relations with SRCs (Gupta 1997, 308-9). Gujral had advocated a policy to "create a sense of easiness" among Indian smaller neighbours and manage conflicts in the region. Gujral Doctrine prescribed following five guiding principles with regards to conducting India's relations with its immediate neighbours: India should not ask for reciprocity in its relations with all SAARC members, except Pakistan. Rather it would give and accommodate others whatever it can in good faith and trust; No regional country must allow the use of its territory against the interest of another state in the region; No state should interfere in internal affairs of another state; All regional states must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states; All SAARC members must settle their political disputes and contentious issues through peaceful means and bilateral negotiations. These principles were based on the belief that "India's stature and strength" could not be separated from the nature and "quality of its relations with its neighbours." Thus, New Delhi must recognize the "supreme importance" of cordial and friendly relations with its neighbours. Bhatta claimed that this doctrine was neither applied nor discussed seriously at the policy level. Indian policy-makers were doubtful about it. Most importantly, "once Gujral was out of power, the doctrine went with him" (Bhatta 2004). Rana claimed that Gujral doctrine had envisioned to benignly project Indian power

through providing help to regional states but it was “rudely interrupted” after fall of his government (Rana 1999, 106).

The Initiatives of the BJP Government

In late 1990s, the BJP government strived to improve its relations with Islamabad. New Delhi took this decision in the wake of strategic parity created after detonation of nuclear bomb by Pakistan in response to Indian explosions of May 1998. In early 1999, Prime Minister Vajpayee paid a visit to Pakistan and signed the historic Lahore declaration which was regarded as a milestone in the history of both countries’ relations with each other. Vajpayee went to the historical Pakistan monument (Minar-e-Pakistan) and announced accepting Pakistan’s existence wholeheartedly. Both states initiated a peace process aimed at addressing political problems between them including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Unfortunately, the process was derailed following Kargil war and consequent political crises leading to a military coup against the civilian government in Pakistan in October 1999. Another peace bid was made in 2001 during President Musharraf’s visit to India. Despite some progress during the talks, the Agra summit could not help improve the bilateral relations of the two states. There was a perception in Pakistan that the summit was subverted by some hardcore elements in the Indian government. Both countries agreed in 2004 to launch a composite dialogue process in eight main areas and took some Confidential Building Measures (CBMs) to improve bilateral relations as well as the general political environment of South Asia. The Composite Dialogue process covered following eight areas; peace and security; Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen; Sir Creek; Wullar Barrage / Talbul navigation project; terrorism and drug trafficking; trade and economic cooperation; and promotion of friendly exchanges (Ahmad 2007, 62).

However, the Indian government stopped this peace initiative ultimately following the Bombay attacks in November 2008. Despite several attempts made by the successive governments in Pakistan, the peace process could not revive. Since, BJP led by Modi came into power in 2014, the relations between India and Pakistan saw their worse and still there are no signs of improvement.

India’s Bilateral Initiatives and Regional Peace and Security

India’s bilateral talks with its smaller neighbours, particularly Pakistan, failed to give concrete results. Several rounds of talks between India and Pakistan were held to address their bilateral problems including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir in the light of understanding reached in Simla agreement. However, India’s inflexible attitude and unwillingness to give any territorial concessions to Pakistan, and latter’s refusal to accept the status quo, prevented both countries from reaching an agreement. In fact, Indian elites viewed that Pakistan had lost its strategic advantages which it had enjoyed during the cold war and its ability to inflict damage to New Delhi had been significantly decreased. Thus, Kashmir dispute would ultimately be settled on Indian terms. As such, New Delhi did not need to give any concessions to Islamabad on the issue. Indian behaviour was similar on other issues with Pakistan (Wirsing 2001, 425-7).

Thus, bilateral negotiations could not contribute to build lasting peace in the region. Meanwhile, some new contentious issues and political problems cropped up in the region, such as issue of Siachen glacier, construction of water reservoirs in Indian occupied Kashmir against the spirit of the Indus Water Treaty (IWT), rise of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir and recurring terrorist

activities in India and Pakistan led both countries to accuse each other for having proxy wars against it. Nonetheless, these events further strained India-Pakistan bilateral relations and clouds of war shadowed several times over South Asia. The militants' activities and armed attacks on several places, such as those on Indian Parliament in 2001, Bombay incident of 2008, brought the two states on the verge of war. These incidents virtually nullified all the progress made in improving bilateral relations through various CBMs, and increasing people-to-people contacts. These incidents led both states to revert back to the previous positions, leading to disrupt communication links, and degrade diplomatic ties etc. (Jha 2004, 117). The history of South Asia convinced the people that in most cases even a single contentious issue could destroy the progress made after years of coordinated efforts (Brar 2003, 32). Later on, militant attacks on Indian military camps in Pathankot and Uri in 2016 and standoff after an attack on Indian military convoy in Pulwama in IOJK 2019 further deteriorated bilateral relations of both states.

Sometimes, Indian government also backed-down after reaching agreement with Pakistan on resolution of a bilateral dispute such as Siachen Glacier. Indian forces had captured Siachen glacier in 1984 in gross violation of its two bilateral agreements with Pakistan on Kashmir, i.e. Karachi agreement of 1949 and Simla agreement of 1972 (Ahmad 2006, 88-92). The conflict has far taken thousands of lives from both sides, mostly due to harsh weather conditions ("Siachen dispute," 2011). The conflict was a byproduct of Kashmir issue and could cause a major war between two states. Kargil war of 1999 was also linked to Siachen issue which was easily resolvable. In fact, both states had reached to some "reasonable agreement" on it. They had agreed on withdrawal and redeployment of troops during bilateral talks in 1989 and then in 1992 (Ahmad 2006). Both countries were again close to agreement on the issue during Musharraf era, i.e. 2007 when political uncertainty in Pakistan prevented further progress to that end ("Siachen dispute," 2011). Indian government stepped back from an agreement reached in 1989 and then in 1992 due to narrow domestic political and electoral considerations. New Delhi did not withdraw troops from Siachen fearing that people might consider it a "retreat." Ahmad argued that the inability of successive Indian government to sign agreement on Siachen and "obstructionist attitude" on other contentious issues such as Sir Creek and Wullar Barrage had shown "the depth of irrationality on the part of India's ruling elites" (Ahmad 2006). In November 2006, the US diplomats noted that India and Pakistan had come "very close" to an agreement on Siachen twice but each time Indian government was "forced to back out" by hardliners in the Congress party, opposition parties and Indian defence establishment (Sattar 2011).

Ahmad observed that Indian army had a "final say" on country's policy on Siachen issue, and it had successfully sold the notion that Siachen had a strategic importance for New Delhi. It believed that the territory not only separated Pakistan from China but its control also gave Indian forces an opportunity to keep watch on Khunjab pass and Karakoram highway. Moreover, it strengthened Indian defence in Jammu, Ladakh, and Kashmir against any possible Chinese or Pakistani threat (Ahmad 2006).

Several Indian and international experts including Mehta, Ahlawat, Chako, Sawhney, and Dani had seriously questioned and rejected the thesis of strategic importance of the area for India (Ahmad 2006). The American diplomats in India also believed that Siachen lacked "military strategic relevance." They also claimed that Indian army was responsible for the deadlock on Siachen issue.

Indian government could not go ahead on any possible deal on Siachen issue without a prior and open support or at least neutrality by Indian army. The then Indian Army Chief, J. J. Singh, frequently appeared in the press stating that Indian army could not support withdrawal of troops from Siachen. Reportedly, Indian army had “drawn a line with its political leadership” and told it that withdrawal of troops from Siachen would “tantamount to ceding the area to Pakistan due to the difficulty of retaking it should Pakistan occupy it” (Sattar 2011). David Mulford, the former US Ambassador in New Delhi, observed that agreement on Siachen was “improbable” when Indian army was publicly opposing it (WikiLeaks, 2011). Apparently Indian army was opposed to troop withdrawal from Siachen due to: its belief that it had acquired strategic advantage over China; distrust of Pakistan; and desire to hold on the territory for which thousands of Indian troops had sacrificed their lives. However, internal corruption in the army was also one of the causes of its opposition to any deal with Pakistan (WikiLeaks, 2011; Sattar 2011). India was spending US\$ 670 million every year in Siachen, but its army believed that it was a small sum as compared to its overall defence outlays (Sattar 2011). In 2011, India “hardened its position” during defence secretaries level talks. Pakistani officials claimed that India was not willing to reach to an agreement due to “pressure and intransigence” of its army. Though Indians postured themselves “being flexible in the media” but in reality they were not “willing to resolve the issue” (“Siachen dispute,” 2011).

Instead of resolving the problem through constructive talks and other peaceful means, India mostly strived to use them to pressurize Pakistan either through coercing it or to isolate it in the world or the both ways. For instance, India deployed its troops on Pakistani borders several times apparently to wage war against it. Such moves were notably observed in 1986, 2001, 2008, 2016 and 2019. Reportedly, the US had averted a possible war between the two states in early 1990s. It was believed in Pakistan that its nuclear program had deterred India from attacking it. Sometimes, the US also played its role to prevent war in South Asia (Hussain 2010, 11-4). This view has been endorsed by international and neutral experts. For instance, Stephen Cohen once explained Indian mind set in these words:

Not a few Indian generals and strategists have told me that if only America would strip Pakistan of its nuclear weapons then the Indian army could destroy the Pakistan army and the whole thing would be over. This of course is both silly and dangerous—and could lead to a catastrophic misjudgment when the fifth India-Pakistan crisis does come. We were close to one last year. I have no doubt that the people who tried to trigger a new India-Pakistan war will try again (Cohen 2009).

The persistence of unresolved political problems and bilateral disputes of SRCs with India continued to shadow New Delhi’s relations with its neighbours as well as overall regional political atmosphere. For instance, ill-defined and poorly demarcated boundaries between India and Bangladesh resulted in numerous firing incidents, killing of hundreds of innocent Bengalis in the hands of Indian forces, and skirmishes between the two states every year. India’s water disputes with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal occasionally strained their bilateral relations. The SRCs also alleged that India continued to create internal problems, disturbances and instability in its neighbourhood to pressurize them to make concessions. India’s covert support to anti-state elements in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan are clear manifestations of Indian policy (Naazer 2018-a; Naazer 2018-c; Naazer 2019). Deployment of India’s troops in Sri Lanka and

Maldives in 1987 and 1988, respectively, was also interpreted as part of its hegemonic designs and pressure tactics (Hagerty 1991, 353-63).

The SRCs wanted to preserve their separate identity, national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, economic independence and growth, social development, and equitable distribution of benefits of regional cooperation under the SAARC framework, and desired peaceful, trustful and friendly political environment to achieve these goals. Indian leadership not only frustrated their expectations but also strove to create problems for them to extract undue benefits. India being an opportunistic neighbour did not miss any opportunity of exploiting internal problems and political situation arising out of domestic unrest, and instability in the SRCs. India due to its towering size, central location, and huge resources generally intended to cultivate, exploit or inflame internal conflicts, insurgencies, revolts and terrorist activities in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka to extract concessions, and impose dictates on them and to promote its political and strategic interests in the region (Naazer 2018-c; Naazer 2020).

CONCLUSION

There was a divergence of perspective between India and the rest of the members regarding South Asian regionalism. SRCs mainly wanted to use SAARC as a forum to promote their security, political and economic interests. They mainly sought to preserve their distinct identity as a sovereign nation-state interacting with other states within and outside the region on the basis of sovereign equality. They also sought to avoid Indian dominance and to protect national security, and territorial integrity besides pursuing economic independence and growth and social development as well as equitable distribution of gains of regional cooperation. They asserted that conducive political environment was vital for the success of South Asian regionalism that warranted resolution of bilateral contentious issue and political problems in the region as it would provide strong foundation for the growth of regional cooperation. They sought to use SAARC as a forum to discuss and resolve their political problems and bilateral disputes because it could contribute towards growth of mutual trust, understanding, friendship and we-feeling among the members thought to be essential for sustained regional cooperation. They hoped that India would play a leading and positive role to establish constructive partnership among SAARC members. However, New Delhi could not come up to the expectations of SRCs and did not respond positively to their needs and demands. It did not take any serious efforts to address concerns and fears of its co-members in SAARC. SRCs had to look outside the region to meet their security, political and economic needs.

New Delhi believed that it had no compulsion to compromise its position due to its dominance in the region and that its neighbours would ultimately have to accept the status quo. Thus, India deliberately did not allow the growth of multilateralism in political and security matters in order to consolidate its military and political dominance in South Asia. India's insistence to exclude political problems and contentious issues from discussion in SAARC meetings made it an ineffective organization.

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