



India's Role in SAARC: An Appraisal *

Manzoor Ahmad Naazer¹

Abstract:

The success and performance of regional cooperative arrangements mainly depends on the role and behaviour of its member states, particularly the core member. The core state is superior than others in terms of its size, population, military and economic power, level of industrial development and natural resources etc. The core member can either spur or impede the regional cooperation on the basis of perceived benefits in the process. Its behaviour is generally determined by its self-image, national capabilities, potential to achieve its interests unilaterally or through its linkages with great powers outside the region. Under these theoretical underpinnings, the study endeavours to investigate India's role in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). India controls the key position lying in the centre of South Asia and being the largest member of SAARC as it encompasses about four-fifths of the regional territory, population, Gross Domestic Product and global trade etc. This study employed qualitative research method, using descriptive and analytical tools. Data has mainly been collected from the secondary sources such as published books, research reports and articles etc. Thematic analysis method has been used to generate patterns, make generalizations, and draw conclusions.

Key words: Pakistan, SAARC, South Asia, Indian role, behaviour, political polarization.

INTRODUCTION

The performance of international organizations largely depends on the behaviour of their members. If any organization does not perform satisfactorily, the fault generally lies with its members. Thus, the growth of regionalism cannot be rationally understood without studying members' behaviour. The record of regionalism, particularly in the developing world, shows that the "role and behaviour" of member states had been one of the main causes of the failure of several regional arrangements (Archer 2001, 131; Kizilbash 1991, 117; Gupta & Handa 1989, 16).

The experience of regionalism in Western Europe and Southeast Asia suggested that the largest members in both EU and ASEAN had played a vital role in making these grouping successful. IR

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Politics & International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: manzoor.ahmad@iiu.edu.pk

scholars, since its inception, believed that regional cooperation in South Asia would largely depend on India's behaviour and role in SAARC. Due to "Indo-centricity of the region," the role of India was critical for the success of SAARC. They maintained that the behaviour of smaller regional countries (SRCs) was also "crucial" for its success but it was "India's role and attitude that would determine the survival and sustenance of SAARC." It would be more so because the attitude, perception and policies of SRCs towards SAARC would also be determined by Indian attitude towards them (Naqash 1994, 107; Narain & Upreti 1991, 7-9).

This paper aims to explore Indian role and behaviour in SAARC. This study employed qualitative research method, using descriptive and analytical tools. Data has mainly been collected from the secondary sources such as published books, research reports and articles etc. Thematic analysis method has been used to generate patterns, make generalizations, and draw conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The success and performance of regional cooperative arrangements mainly depends on the role and behaviour of its member states, particularly the core member. The core state is superior than others in terms of its size, population, military and economic power, level of industrial development and natural resources etc. The core member can either spur or impede the regional cooperation on the basis of perceived benefits in the process. Its behaviour is generally determined by its self-image, national capabilities, potential to achieve its interests unilaterally or through its linkages with great powers outside the region (Ahmad, 2013).

INDIA'S ROLE AND BEHAVIOUR IN SAARC

In order to understand India's role and behaviour in SAARC, it is important to first examine Indian perspective on South Asian regionalism in the light of its self-image, capabilities, interests and policies in the region and beyond. The following section surveys India's self-image, interests and policies in the region as well as at the global level.

India's Self-Image and Aspirations

All India National Congress (AINC) wanted to inherit British Indian Empire, and thus sought to preserve unity of Indian subcontinent and bitterly opposed Partition. In fact, the British Indian Empire was extended to Burma till mid 1930s and was also in control of conducting foreign relations of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in the north and Afghanistan and Iran in the west. AINC had also advocated formation of an Asian or at least South Asian Federation comprising the nations of the sub-continent as well as Burma, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq (Naazer 2020, 187-8). It also wanted India to play a leading role in world politics.

India's Quest for the Larger Role in World Politics

In the post-independence period, Indian leadership strived to become the leader of the Third World through either championing the cause of anti-colonialism or in the name of non-alignment. India's founding fathers intended to pursue policy of non-alignment believing that it was the best way to guarantee country's sovereignty (Maass 1996, 270). It would help India to keep itself away from the power politics of two super powers. It would also enable India to pursue an independent course of action and to play the role of a major power, as a leader of the non-aligned developing world, in global affairs "as a champion of peace and freedom" (Khosla 1999, 185-6). India was also among the

founding members of several Asian international organizations formed during 1950s and initiator of several conferences including Asian Relations Conferences, Conference on Indonesia (1949), Colombo Conference on Indo-China (1954), and Bandung Conference (1955) etc. (Jayasekera 2003, 346).

India actively supported various schemes of economic integration and common markets etc. during 1950s. Its interest was for the large-scale and macro-regional cooperative schemes ideally those which could include communist states and pave the way for "Afro-Asian cooperation." More than anything else, Indian leadership was motivated by its "larger ambitions for a major role in Third World affairs." However, India's interest in macro-regional schemes declined in 1960s due to certain reasons, i.e., policy of Southeast Asian states especially Indonesia to promote sub-regional cooperation in their area and India's little interest in Southeast Asian affairs; the successful Chinese policy to challenge India as a leader of the Third World; change of Indian leadership, and; its domestic economic problems (Schubert 1978, 443; Jayasekera 2003, 350).

Chinese efforts were supported by Pakistan which remained active, in its post-independence history, in forming or joining international organizations mainly to foil Indian ambitions to become the leader of the Third World (Schubert 1978, 443). The US military and economic aid had enabled Pakistan to counter-balance India in South Asia. However, Pakistan's capabilities were severely curtailed after its defeat and resultant disintegration during its 1971 war with India which left the latter to play role as a regional power in South Asia. By then, the US had also abandoned its policy of providing military assistance to Pakistan for creating balance in South Asia and accepted India as dominant regional power despite Indo-Soviet alliance (Scalapino 1991, 22). The US had already started providing military equipments and other assistance to India since its war with China (Sattar 1997, 82-5). India was a Soviet "strategic ally and close friend" and had received massive military and economic aid from Moscow during the Cold War. As such, both the superpowers unofficially encouraged India to play its role as a "controlling force" in South Asia. With their blessings New Delhi was able to enhance its military capabilities backed by its growing economy. Resultantly, India became a regional naval power in 1980s and believed that its "zone of responsibility" had extended to the whole Indian Ocean region due to its vital trade interests. Washington further changed its policy towards India in mid-1980s after realizing that India was becoming an important power in Asia. It agreed on increased transfer of technology including super computers to India, and to share the results of military research. It also accepted India's "right" to ensure "stability" in South Asia (Bratersky & Lunyov 1990, 933-8).

The easing of the cold war and waning Soviet power decreased Moscow's interest in South Asia and it "distanced itself" from New Delhi which gave India an opportunity to further warm up its relations with the US (Muni 1991, 865). By then, India had realized that policy of non-alignment was not beneficial in the context of a unipolar world. India looked forward to come into terms with Washington and find a role of "security manager" in Indian Ocean region with US approval (Thornton 1992, 1064-7). India needed cooperation with Washington in economic, scientific and military fields. Domestically, it introduced economic liberalization to wrest investment for its vast market. It was also an American demand and by courting Washington, India was also able to attract investment and multilateral aid from donor agencies. These all factors helped improve Indian image and posture in the outside world (Muni 1991, 867).

Externally, India found it useful to exploit the fear of expansion of political Islam in Western China, Central Asia, Western Asia and South Asia. It got motivated to share its concerns with China, Israel and the US because their policy agendas were “strikingly parallel” to its own national agenda. It sought a rapprochement with China as well as strived to “embrace” Israel that would also bring US-India “entente” on the basis of antagonism to Islam (Thornton 1992, 1074-7).

Due to shared interests with India, Washington further shifted its South Asian policy, i.e. from maintaining some balance between India and Pakistan to shift it in New Delhi's favour (Muni 1991, 866). In 1990s, the US increased cooperation with and provided various sort of assistance to India helping it to consolidate its power – both in military and economic terms – and emerged as an Asian power. Resultantly, it was in a position to transform it as an emerging great power in the world at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Buzan observed that India had aspired to have “special rights and duties in the management of international society.” However, it is still debatable that it is willing to change its policies according to “the managerial responsibilities it bears” (Buzan 2002,17-8).

In sum, India for most of the time envisaged a global role for itself defining its interests and objectives far beyond South Asia. New Delhi believed that South Asia was a region of marginal importance for a state like India which had the potential to become an Asian or even a world power. Due to its growing economic and trade linkages abroad, Indian leadership believed that SAARC needs India more than India needs SAARC.

India's Policy towards South Asia

During the Cold War, India's quest to become the leader of the developing world and inclination to see neighbours as its protectorates or maximum as deferential junior partners prevented it from forming any cooperative scheme in South Asia. Contrary to its policy of “idealism” outside the region, i.e., in global politics, India from its inception pursued realist course of action towards its smaller neighbours (Mohan 2006). Indian policy was characterized by a contradiction and duplicity at global and regional level. At global level, India championed the cause of anti-colonialism and preached the principles of peaceful co-existence, freedom and sovereign equality of all nations, non-interference in each others' internal affairs, non-aggression and non-violence, peaceful resolution of disputes, mutuality of interests, justice in international economic system, non-alignment and so on. It not only strived to unite the developing states to enhance their power in the world politics but also championed the cause of protecting them, through their greater unity, from the domination and exploitation of great powers particularly, the West (Jayasekera 2003, 345-51). Albeit, this idealism at the world level, post independence Indian policy towards its South Asian neighbours depicted Machiavellian realism. At different times and on different issues, Muni observed, “Indian policy and diplomacy” towards its neighbours, reflected “a colonial mindset and a domineering personal style” (Muni 2003, 195). It was also occasionally characterized by “an attitudinal aggressiveness and a value-oriented arrogance” interpreted by SRCs as Indian “hegemonism.” Majority of Indian elites do not think that anything was wrong in India's “imperial behaviour.” Rather, they try to justify it believing that it is “natural” for a big state and “often necessary to assert the undeniable but nevertheless unaccepted fact of India's primacy in the region” (Gupta, Gupta and Handa 1989, 23, 26-7).

New Delhi believed that India was the inheritor of the imperial British rights and privileges in South Asia. Preaching anti-colonialism at the world level and claiming imperial rights at the regional level clearly showed duplicity in its external policies. Notwithstanding, its self-claimed and self-imposed security concerns, India signed treaties with Nepal and Bhutan which were earlier imposed on them by the British Indian Empire. These treaties virtually left both the states as Indian protectorates. India later tried to impose similar type of treaty on Bangladesh (Gupta, Gupta and Handa 1989, 18).

India even did not accept the existence of Pakistan whole-heartedly and perceived partition as an “unavoidable expedient” which would be “short lived.” At worst, they hoped that Pakistan would “settle down as a deferential junior partner within an Indian sphere of influence” (Harrison 1991, 22-3). India did not heed the Nepalese demand of revising their bilateral agreement of 1950 and opposed Bhutan’s aspirations to establish direct diplomatic relations with other states including China for long (Muni 2003, 195). These examples are just an iceberg of Indian imperialist mindset which always led New Delhi to obstruct SRCs to establish relations with outside world and raise objections over Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on having links with China and the West, particularly the US. Indian leadership continued to express its concerns and protested whenever the SRCs sought to purchase arms and improve their military capabilities for their genuine security needs.

This attitude on the part of Indian leadership suggested that it wanted its neighbours weak, overshadowed under huge Indian size and capabilities and as such dependent on New Delhi. In fact, SRCs had no potential to meet India’s capabilities or pose it any threat but it continued to oppose their genuine needs and legitimate aspirations to act as sovereign states in the comity of nations. When, these states tried to establish relations with the great powers, they were maligned, by New Delhi, over “bringing foreign influence” and “external powers” in the region. India did not hesitate to exploit the inherited weakness of SRCs which lived under the fear of India’s “expansionist” policy. Their fears were reinforced due to persistence of their unresolved disputes with India and occasional Indian attempts to show “hegemonic flavour” towards them. Particularly, Nepal and Bhutan constantly lived under the threat of being annexed, like Sikkim, by India (Bhatta 2004). India also either cultivated or exploited internal conflicts, political instability, armed revolts, insurgencies and terrorism in SRCs in order to extract political benefits, undue concessions and dictates its terms on them compromising their security, sovereignty and national integrity (Naazer, 2018-d).

India’s Perspective on South Asian Regionalism

New Delhi initially looked at the Bangladeshi proposal with suspicion and responded cautiously. The Western countries had shown their enthusiasm towards the proposed arrangement due to which, particularly in the context of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, India was suspicious about it. New Delhi also feared that SRCs wanted to gang against it up to jointly contain it in the region and isolate it at the global level (Thapliyal 1999, 54). India’s attitude towards SAARC proposal was “truly ambivalent” as it contained both the opportunities and challenges to New Delhi. Since, India had bilateral disputes and political problems with all its neighbours, New Delhi did not want their “internationalization” (Muni 1991-b, 62; Naqvi 1991, 185). India, an advocate of the unity of the entire developing world against the alleged exploitative and neo-imperialists policies of the West,

was fearful of its weak neighbours being united against its own imperialist ambitions in the region. Due to its unique geo-strategic position, India enjoyed manifold advantages in treating its neighbours bilaterally. Thus New Delhi believed that bilateralism was the best way to deal with its SRCs. When it received the proposal, India thought that, in the words of Naqvi, “[t]he Lilliputians of the region want to tie down the Indian Gullivar” (Naqvi 1991, 183; Mohla 1988). As such, the proposal presented a potential challenge which could possibly come in the shape of “collective pressure” of all states to resolve their disputes with India.

The proposal also offered some political opportunities to India. As Muni observed, there were some “possibilities of making the neighbours look inward” for their security and developmental requirements (Muni 1991-b, 62). New Delhi believed that a regional organization such as SAARC could provide India “a unique platform” to revise South Asia’s position in global politics through delinking and further intensification of its autonomy from external powers. It could also organizationally and politically legitimize New Delhi’s leadership in South Asia which would become a “zone of direct Indian interests” (Bratersky & Lunyov 1990, 929). Regional economic cooperation offered “immensely attractive opportunities” to its commerce, industries and banking sectors which were far developed and advanced in many respects than those of the other regional states (Naqvi 1991, 185). Moreover, in the wake of ever increasing economic globalization, the strong Indian economy alone could not face the powerful economic blocs such as those emerging then in Western Europe, and Southeast Asia.

SAARC could also give India an opportunity to strengthen its positions at global level through adopting common positions on various political matters, such as arms race, disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation etc. It was interested to promote cooperation with its neighbours on international economic issues, trade negotiations and evolving common positions on matters related to the development aid and trade concessions etc. to the developing world at different forums like the World Bank, UNO, UNCTAD, and ESCAP as well as to pursue common strategies to achieve NIEO objectives (Jha 2004, 115-6; Muni 1991-b, 63).

India decided to benefit from the opportunities and pre-empt any challenge through institutional arrangements. As such, it accepted the proposal to launch SAARC but was able to include two provisions in its charter that could protect it from unwanted pressure of other members. It provided that all decisions would be made on the basis of unanimity and contentious issues and bilateral disputes would be excluded from deliberations. These provisions, however, proved to be detrimental to the growth of regionalism in South Asia (Naazer 2023).

Such arrangements, however, were not unique to SAARC only. According to Brucan, international organizations are part of the modern nation-state system and reflect the power structure of the contemporary world (Brucan 1977, 95). Thus, the institutional structures of IOs reflect the fears and hopes of their members (Naazer, 2018-a).

Divergent Interests and Priorities in SAARC

Convergences of interests in political, social and ideological terms facilitated evolution of regional cooperation in other organizations. But the South Asian countries (SACs) lacked convergences of security, political and economic interests largely due to religious and political rivalries and ideological and strategic differences. Due to disparities in their capabilities, potential and level of

development, their priorities were also different. The SRCs were interested to secure political independence, national security, sovereign equality and free and unrestricted interactions with the rest of the world. But India wanted to contain the region against outside interference and its own recognition as the dominant and “principal power” in South Asia (Rizvi, 1991, 206-12; Kapur 1991, 44). Due to dearth of financial resources needed for investment and national development at their part, the SRCs wanted to accept foreign funding but it was a sensitive matter for India. It feared that it could bring foreign influence in the region. The SRCs wanted to address their bilateral disputes and political problems with India through regional platform. But India did not want internationalization of these issues or to let the SRCs to unite against and pressurize it for such matters. Rather, it was more interested in trade issues that would serve its economic interest due to its vast resource base, production capacity, well endowed, resilient and diversified economy and being far more self-sufficient than its neighbours who were less developed. Some of them were still at early stages of development and fearful of Indian economic domination (Mohla 1988, 302; Muni 1991-b, 62-5, and 71. India had proposed to include **trade liberalization** in agreed areas of cooperation as early as 1983 when its own economy was yet not opened to the world (Naazer, 2015). But the more serious difference between India and its neighbours was on threat perception which had a “vital bearing” on the growth of regionalism in South Asia.

Divergent Security Perceptions of Regional States

The geostrategic environment of a region influences the threat perceptions of the regional states. The threat perception is related to and originates from “the capabilities and threatening behaviour of a real or perceived adversary” and puts contradictory effects, based on the nature of the threat itself, on the process of regionalism. If threat comes from an outside power, it puts a unifying effect on the regional states leading them to take collective measures against the threat. In case the threat comes from within the region, it adversely affects the process breeding disunity, fear and misunderstanding among the members. If any member of a grouping perceives threat from another member, the prospects of cooperation between them become bleak. If some members believe that one of their partners “is not only expansionist but is determined to pursue its hegemonic designs, the chances of making any cooperative venture a success are effectively reduced” (Cheema 1989, 103-7).

Perceptions matter. In some ways perceptions are as important as reality itself. Most importantly, a country's foreign policy is based on its own perception about reality which may differ from others. Divergent perceptions of SAARC states had resulted in their different foreign policy orientations.

The presence of a common external enemy or shared threat perception is considered as an important factor for successful growth of regionalism (Haas 1958, 628). The growth of regionalism was even not easy in Western Europe and Southeast Asia where the regional states not only had the identical political culture, socio-economic conditions, cultural values, and economic policies but also a common fear of internal subversion and security threat from the same outside power (Jha 2004, 43). The Western European States were capitalist and democratic. While ASEAN members were adhering to “a common political ideology of democracy with a semi-authoritarian and quasi-democratic capitalist system” (Khan 1991, 43). SACs did not share common threat perception which prevented them from evolving collective response to various crises situations in the region. As such it was considered that growth of South Asian regionalism would be even more difficult. At

minimum, it was expected to help prevent rise of conflicts through “collective wisdom and persuasion” (Jha 2004, 115).

Cheema identified three main causes of tension in South Asia which contributed considerably to shape threat perception of the regional states. The sources include: asymmetric balance of power in the region; inter-state conflicts and; relations of regional states with interested external powers (1989, 105). Somehow, all these sources were more or less related to India's size and policies. Due to huge power asymmetry arising out of giant Indian size and capabilities and presence of bilateral disputes with New Delhi, all SRCs were “afraid of the Indian Leviathan” (Jha 2004, 113). These fears were aggravated by India's “occasional attempts to transform its natural pre-eminence into predominance” (Sabur 2003, 87-8). Thus, the SRCs believed that threats to their security were, in several respects, “India-oriented” (Cheema 1989, 118). Believing that their insecurity was “rooted” within the region itself, they formulated their security policies by linking their interests on an extra-regional basis. Indian threat led the SRCs to “explore extra-regional security linkages whenever they found it to be expedient” (Jha 2004, 115; Sabur 2003, 87-8). They established relations with the outside powers particularly the US, the UK and China for their security concerns. The SRCs also built extra-regional linkages due to their political and economic compulsions. But India viewed these links particularly with the US and China as a threat to its own security (Scalapino 1991, 24).

There has been a perception in India that involvement and influence of outside powers, particularly the US and China, damaged South Asian environment as it sowed the seeds of distrust and suspicions among regional states and adversely “affected the cordial intra-regional relations.” For instance, Sudhakar argued that during the cold war, both the US and China provided Pakistan military, political, technical and economic aid and encouraged it to challenge its military and political power in the region. Particularly China, Sudhakar maintained, in its quest to isolate India and to become unrivalled leader in Asia, extended aid to Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and had played a key role in inter-state rivalries in the region (1994, 203-4). Naqash observed that involvement of superpowers in South Asia had “more negative than positive” effect on the regional politics (1994, 105). However, this factor alone was not responsible for shaping security perception of the regional states. The involvement of external powers and their growing influence in South Asia, which was construed by New Delhi as a matter of security concern for itself, was actually caused by India's own policies. Cheema claimed that India's policies and behaviour had provided external powers with the opportunities to make inroad in South Asia. The outsiders having important interests in the region, when found the chances, exploited them for their benefits. But regional states could foil their intentions through concerted efforts and creating some “conflict-resolving mechanism” in South Asia (Cheema 1989, 118). Nonetheless, during the cold war these “two diametrically opposite perceptions dominated security thinking as well as practical policy of the regional states in South Asia.” The presence of “a big power-small power syndrome” was one of the major causes of mutual fears and resultant different security perspectives of regional states. Power asymmetry in South Asia was “an objective” and unchangeable reality. But India's perception towards its neighbour could be modified and the vice versa (Sabur 2003, 87-8 and 95). The regional states, particularly India could learn lesson from the UE and ASEAN experiences.

INDIA'S BEHAVIOUR AND ITS EFFECT ON WORKING OF SAARC

Indian behavior adversely affected the attitude of SRCs towards the process of regional cooperation. The SRCs wanted progress on political side that could provide them a congenial political environment for economic cooperation. Indian unwillingness to address their grievances left them with no option but to resist India on several issues. Sudhakar observed that decisions taken at the summit level were mostly related to "less important" areas. If and when some important decisions were made, they were rarely implemented. The conventions on suppression of terrorism and on narcotics drugs and psychotropic substances are its clear examples. It was a sign of lack of commitment, sincerity and sense of responsibility on the part of SRCs. Their "conduct of bilateral relations" had showed that they were not enthusiastic to create necessary environment for growth of regionalism (Sudhakar 1994, 200-3). Muni noted that Indian behaviour towards its neighbours led them to pursue "various strategies of pinpricks, irritations, harassment, denial of mutual benefits, sabotage and even persisting confrontation." Pakistan, as well as other members, did not hesitate to adopt "a confrontationist approach" towards India, Muni maintained (Muni 2003, 185-6).

India perceived SRCs particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh, as responsible for impeding the process of regional cooperation. For India, these members lacked commitment to promote regionalism in South Asia (Kumar 2007). Pattanaik claimed that the SRCs being sensitive to their sovereignty and national identity had constructed a regional enemy which prevented growth of regionalism in South Asia (Pattanaik 2006, 139-60).

However, it had been SRCs' particularly Pakistan's view, that "the failure to address" the political issues and create a peaceful regional climate, was the main hurdle to growth of regional cooperation. It prevented decision-making on the crucial economic issues and affected the process of implementation of agreements (Hussain 2003, 63). With exception of Bhutan and Maldives, India had most of the time tense relations with its neighbours. Lack of cordial relations among SAARC members created difficulties in reaching decisions which required consensus among all members. Even once decisions were taken, unfavourable bilateral relations affected their implementation (Mishra 2004, 642; Ahmad 2002, 190-1).

Political Polarization in South Asia

SAARC instead of contributing in evolution of common regional identity, actually gave rise to or intensified political polarization in South Asia. Indian commentators are of the view that SAARC and its "summit diplomacy" could not remove mutual fears and distrust among its members. The summits, generally marked by great pomp and show, instead of reducing regional tensions, at times deteriorated relations between regional states. On several occasions, Pakistan and other SRCs raised their political problems and bilateral disputes with India during informal meetings or in press conferences etc. at the eve of summit meetings. New Delhi interpreted it as part of their attempts to "alienate and accuse India." Sudhakar claimed that these moves ultimately damaged the regional political environment and as such, SAARC summits caused a "political polarization" in South Asia. On such occasions, SRCs demonstrated their "more inclination to come closer as a group" leaving India to feel "more or less isolated in the region" (Sudhakar 1994, 199-201). Perhaps due to this reason, India perceived that SRCs were trying to use SAARC as a forum to gang up against it. However, the evidence suggests that informal discussions at the sidelines of summit

meetings proved to be quite helpful in defusing tensions, melting ice and initiating talks and reaching agreements among members, more so between India and Pakistan (Naazer, 2018-c).

Anti-India Feelings in South Asia

Unresolved political problems and bilateral disputes with India compounded by fear of domination due to vast disparities in size and capabilities as well as its hegemonic designs in the region, occasionally reflected in its ambitious foreign policy and aggressive and coercive diplomacy created strong anti-India feelings in all SRCs. Such perceptions were reinforced due to India's insistence to contain the region against foreign influences particularly those of great powers such as China and the US. There is a perception in India that the ruling elites of SRCs at times consciously created such feelings finding New Delhi "a convenient scapegoat" for their internal problems such as democratic deficit, legitimacy crises, political instability, and other domestic issues. New Delhi also believed that SRCs used anti-India feelings to claim national identity and equality with, and also to wrest political and economic concessions from, India. Sometimes, the external powers such as the US and China also supported SRCs to use anti-Indianism to tarnish its image and to develop "an adversary relationship" with India for political reasons (Sudhakar 1994, 24, 194-7, and 208).

However, Gupta et al. (1989) while exploring the causes of anti-Indianism in South Asia had explained it more comprehensively and quoted an American scholar who had analyzed anti-Americanism in the developing world in these words: "Part of the way they look at us is based on how they think we look at them" (Embree 1984). Thus, the problem was linked with India's ambitious foreign policy and desire to contain South Asia against the foreign influence which was regarded as Indian "desire for hegemony" (Sudhakar 1994, 196-7).

Nepal and Sri Lanka openly expressed their fears over India's hegemonic policies. It was manifested, in case of Sri Lanka, during "air-drop of food" in Tamil controlled areas, and then imposing a peace agreement on Colombo. Nepal too, faced Indian coercion during late 1980s when New Delhi, after realizing that Katmandu was asserting independent policies, had suspended its transit facilities (Bastiampillai 1996, 220; Naazer 2018-b). Indian persistent intervention in its neighbouring states and quest to destabilize the latter in its bid to coerce them and extract political benefits, imposing unequal treaties, undermining their sovereignty and plundering their resources further consolidated anti-India feelings in the region (Naazer, 2018-d). Nevertheless, it prevented growth of regionalism in South Asia.

External Involvement: Causes and Effects

External involvement had always been a matter of serious concern and sensitive matter for India. It persistently condemned SRCs, particularly Pakistan perceiving it as a "Trojan horse" that had brought external influences in South Asia (Kapur 1991, 43-4). India believed that foreign involvement vitiated political environment and impeded growth of regionalism in South Asia. Rana claimed that presence of the US and its alliances in South Asia had "prevented India from ordering affairs" in the region. He claimed that in spite of its dominance in South Asia, India's hands had been "tied behind her back by such great power intrusions" during the cold war. It had taken India "away from her capabilities in dealing with the South Asian situation" (Rana 1999, 105). Some Indian scholars such as Sudhakar has suggested SRCs to readjust their relations particularly with the US and China to "suit" the objectives of regionalism. He argued that SRCs must delink themselves from

the international system through decreasing their reliance on the developed world and China for military and economic aid etc. Only then they can “attain some sort of autonomy from the dominant international system” that would pave the way for growth of regionalism in South Asia. He argued that SRCs may continue trade links with the West but not at the price of South Asian regionalism (Sudhakar 1994, 210). However, this perspective only shows Indian mindset and does not reflect the reality.

The SRCs looked outside the region, mainly due to three reasons; security, political and economic. They perceived security threats from India and naturally looked outward for whatever help they required to ensure their survival and security. They sought political support for strengthening their sovereignty as well as to help resolve their disputes with India. Nepal was motivated in its quest to link with the West to ensure political identity as a sovereign state against India's imperial posture. While Pakistan aimed to get support on Kashmir issue. They also wanted unrestricted interactions with outside power because it could guarantee them equality with other states (Rizvi 1991, 208-9). The SRCs had vast economic interests such as those related to trade and aid. They needed flow of money, knowledge, and technology etc. from the West for their socio-economic development (Muni 1991, 71). In the context of economic globalization, they could not afford to delink from outside world. Even external variable alone could not impede growth of regionalism. It “mostly suffered” due to bilateral problems of SAARC members which provided external powers the opportunities to make inroads in South Asia. Their involvement could be contained had the regional states been “in control of own destiny” and being capable of addressing their mutual political disputes and creating some “conflict-resolving mechanism” under a regional framework (Mohla 1988, 306-8; Cheema 1989, 118).

The massive changes which were taking place within India, such as economic liberalization in the region and adjoining areas such as Central Asia, and most importantly the end of cold war had premised towards prospects of enhanced regional cooperation among SACs. Under prevailing interdependent world, only benevolent and restraint states could successfully aspire to achieve higher position in the world. India needed the support of SRCs to achieve its desired place at the international level including permanent membership in UNSC. These developments required India to adopt more “cooperative” and “accommodative” policy towards its regional partners as it could build its credential as a responsible state to play a broader role in the world politics (Maass 1996, 274-6). Besides, it was also important for India to understand US concerns in the region and project its own capabilities in a way that could convince the US and its allies that New Delhi could become their potential partner to serve their legitimate interests in the region (Rana 1999, 104-7). These developments could present a favourable environment for presence of foreign influence that could help in growth of regionalism. Alternatively, it was also likely that India due to its economic growth would pursue its “comprehensive arms procurement policy” as well as indigenous development and diversification of military related industries to modernize its armed forces. Thus, India's rising political and economic role in the world would help it to achieve its old ambitions of becoming a great power due to which it might perceive policy of accommodation and cooperation towards its neighbours as “irrelevant” (Maas 1996, 275).

There were also voices in India to make “concerted policy moves” aimed at creating “complementarity” of interests with the US through associating itself as a “regional stability

partner” in South Asia. It was expected that the US would finally depart from the region and ultimately rely on its “regional partners, through a policy of delegated peace” to ensure global peace and order as a super power. India had the capabilities to become the US “regional stability partner” in South Asia. It was even so demanding due to India’s own interests and concerns as a “status quo power” to maintain stability in the region. It was thus suggested that India must remove any “significant impediments in Indo-US relations relating to the region” (Rana 1999, 105-7).

India being proudly declaring itself as the “world’s largest democracy” was a strategic ally of authoritarian and anti-democratic Soviet Union during the cold war (Maass 1996, 268). It had championed non-alignment to become a main player, as a leader of the developing states, in the world politics. However, Maass observed, after disintegration of Soviet Union and emergence of unipolar world India was forced to:

design a new ‘marketing strategy.’ Projecting itself as a champion of non-alignment had lost its rhetorical appeal. Rather, a new ideological coinage was needed. It was soon offered by a recently awakened obsession, to which some US and Western politicians fell victim, by having discovered a vaguely defined ‘Islamist threat’ as the new ‘ideological evil’. Fear of a well organized, internationally operating terrorism, an increasing number of terrorist attacks on highly symbolic targets like the World Trade Center in the US, seemed to give credence to such a perceived threat. Consequently, India projected itself as a free and democratic bastion against Islamist terrorism which had already spread to Indian soil in the Kashmir Valley with the help of Pakistani collaborators (Maass 1996, 269).

In the post-cold war era, changed global environment also affected the process of South Asian regional cooperation. India believed that it was the natural economic and political center of South Asia due to which it would get favourable American response towards its security needs. Thus, “India went out of its way to cultivate US goodwill” so that it could get maximum benefits from the changed international political environment. It had provided refueling facilities to American planes during the Gulf war, exchanged high level delegations, held joint naval exercises and opened its economy gratefully accepting FDI from American companies (Gupta 1996, 11-2). At times India adopted “the policy of quid-pro-quo vis-à-vis the US” and willingly accepted its presence in the region as “the global hegemon-patron” and expected that Washington would in turn accept India as “the regional hegemon” (Brar 2003, 38). India gradually strove to appease Washington through shifting or adjusting its priorities including its policy towards Iranian nuclear programme (Naazer, 2022).

The so called global war on terrorism was paralleled by a shift in Indian policy as it started to accept role of external powers in ensuring security in the region. It approved US military supplies to Bangladesh, US assistance to Nepal in its fight against Maoists insurgency and US backed Norwegian peace initiative in Sri Lanka. It believed that US involvement in Sri Lanka and Nepal would serve its national interests. Even Indian security analysts and media also either supported Indian policy or at least did not criticize it. India also sought US help in getting transit facilities and gas exports from Bangladesh. It was an “unprecedented” change in Indian strategic vision in the context of past history of South Asia (Bajpai 2003, 210-1). In the post 9/11 era, India built “a strong strategic partnership” with US government in wide-ranging issues including military and civil nuclear

cooperation. Both states apparently wanted to use this partnership to contain Chinese power but India believed that it was also acknowledgment of its growing importance in global affairs (Sam Perlo-Freeman *et al.* n.d.).

In sum, India changed its old policy of opposing foreign involvement. It warmly welcomed the presence of a foreign power accepting a subordinate role for itself to become a regional hegemonic power. However, in the process India ignored SAARC believing that policy of accommodation and cooperation with towards SRCs was unnecessary.

India's Preference for Bilateralism over Regionalism

The regional states could not evolve a mutually beneficial, "coherent and sustained constructive approach" to interact with each other due to their dissimilar capabilities and interests. The SRCs felt "more comfortable" in a regional framework which could integrate their bilateral concerns and priorities (Muni 2003, 185-8). They wanted, in the words of President Jayewardene, the "regional approaches" to address their political and economic problems (SAARC Secretariat. (1990, 129). Muni observed that regional approach could help promote regional economic and strategic cooperation among SAARC members because it was in conformity with the emerging global norms.

Bilateralism, however, could have been synergized with regional approach, as both of them were not contradictory. Some issues could be handled bilaterally and others at regional level (Muni 2003, 187-8). But, India believed that bilateral channel was the "best way" to interact with SRCs and it forced them to deal with it "one-to-one" (Mohla 1988, 187). India totally preferred bilateralism at the cost of regional approach due to which growth of regionalism suffered in South Asia.

India's policy to deal with its neighbours on bilateral basis was part of its strategic thinking and desire to maintain territorial and power status quo (Makeig 1987, 281). Ahmad observed that India's fears that SRCs would gang up against it prevented it from giving way to the growth of multilateralism (Ahmad 2002, 191). India pursued policy of bilateralism towards SRCs as part of its strategies to "maintain its de facto hegemony in South Asia." It enabled India to avoid internationalization of its disputes and extract maximum advantages from them. Except Pakistan, India successfully imposed its strategy of bilateralism on rest of SAARC members (Gooneratne 2007, 57). On bilateral basis, the SRCs such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal generally found India far superior to deal with on equal terms. During negotiations, India's huge size and power bore "heavily" on them (Naqvi 1991, 191-2). Resultantly, none of them could face India alone for a long time. On such occasions, the SRCs complained, they find India mostly "less than sympathetic to their basic needs and problems." At times, New Delhi demonstrated "an attitudinal aggressiveness and a value-oriented arrogance towards its neighbours" and tried to impose its will on them (Gupta, Gupta, & Handa 1989, 20-7). India was "always inclined to use its size to extract leverage over its weaker neighbours" (Sobhan 1998, 24).

India's undue insistence to treat its disputes only on bilateral basis reinforced and aggravated the fears of the SRCs. They interpreted this policy as an implicit expression of India's "hegemonic diplomacy" (Naqvi 1991, 191-2; Gupta, Gupta, & Handa 1989, 22). India's handling of the situation in Sri Lanka and Maldives in late 1980s, created further apprehensions and mistrust about its ulterior motives. There was a strong reaction in Sri Lanka which intensified the violence therein and also strained bilateral relations of two states. Even in several cases, Indian leadership did not

respect the terms and conditions of the written agreements. Sometimes, while exploiting the weak positions of SRCs, it was also able to dictate them the terms and conditions detrimental to their national interests but ultimately creating lot of hatred towards itself. India's several treaties with Nepal are its clear manifestation (Mishra 2004; Naazer 2018-b). Indian insistence to pursue policy of bilateralism towards its SRCs had created strong anti-India feelings among its SRCs which in turn inhibited growth of regionalism in South Asia. As such, Muni argued that "undue insistence on bilateralism" on the part of Indian leadership created distrust, misperceptions and "avoidable fears and suspicions of Indian dominance" in the region. It also provided "anti-India" forces within and outside the region to exploit these apprehensions in their favour. Most importantly, India's such behaviour instilled "an uncomfortable feeling of dependence and vulnerability among her neighbours" (Muni 2003, 192-3).

India's Behavior during Bilateral Negotiations

India has been inclined to maintain the status quo and seldom showed any flexibility in its position during bilateral negotiations with SRCs. Some of the bilateral disputes among regional states were "intractable" but the SRCs had mostly been "apprehensive and distrustful" of Indian intentions (Sobhan 1998, 24). Due to "Indo-centric nature of the region" a change in Indian behaviour with inclination to show more flexibility and accommodation towards its neighbours on bilateral disputes was crucial for success of regionalism (Maas 1996, 270). As noted by Sobhan, "politics is all about bargaining and compromise" and in order to make South Asian regionalism successful all states were required to make compromises to resolve political problems. However, India owed the largest responsibility. Its lack of interest to "accommodate the concerns" of its partners was not helpful in the growth of regionalism in South Asia. India had no compulsion to make compromise and give concessions to SRCs. However, whenever it accommodated their concerns it had created goodwill towards India (Sobhan 1998, 24).

Cohan argued that India had various big problems in improving its relations with Pakistan but it needed to do something to "convert an enemy into a partner." To that end, it might have to "give a little, but it has a lot to gain." However, he maintained, there was no consensus in New Delhi whether it would negotiate with Pakistan or not. Sometimes Indian leadership claimed that it would not "deal with the generals" and when civilian governments came, New Delhi argued that civilian rulers in Pakistan were "too weak to conclude a deal." Another dilemma was that during negotiations India was not willing to make concessions. For instance, when it felt itself in a weaker position it feared that any concessions would lead it "down a slippery slope." When it felt stronger, it expected "the weaker side to bow." Cohan observed that presently India was "up" but still there was "no serious consideration of a deal that would bring to fruition the process" initiated in 2004. Even when Advani and Jaswant Singh had hailed Jinnah and apparently took soft position towards Pakistan they were severely criticized by Hindu extremist parties. Meanwhile, Indian army, secret agencies and civil bureaucracy such as ministry of external affairs, as well as their counterparts in Pakistani, wanted to keep bilateral conflicts alive for their own vested interests (Cohen 2009).

Maass observed that global political and economics dynamics had also demanded regional cooperation in South Asia. However, it was doubtful whether Indian ruling elites had expected to achieve enough gains from becoming cooperative with its smaller partners. He claimed that one was tempted to assume that "India regards accommodation as unnecessary, considering itself

powerful enough to cope with major irritants or tensions" in South Asia (Maas 1996). Both Sobhan and Khosla agree that there were real issues or problems among regional states, and not merely misunderstandings or "figments of imagination." They adversely affected growth of regionalism. However, they could be resolved in a spirit of give and take (Khosla 1999, 191; Sobhan 1998, 22).

An analysis conducted by a leading Indian magazine with the help of senior journalists from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal had identified following five main reasons of India's strained relations with its neighbours: New Delhi took "its neighbors for granted"; it insisted that India's position was "always right on all issues;" India did not give concession to SRCs; it was not serious to correct trade imbalances of SRCs, and; India was "excessively paranoid about its own security, placing undue emphasis on security at the cost of all other facets of a relationship" (Sudarshan 2002).

India the largest state in the region in every respect had played "minimal" role in shaping the future of SAARC. It behaved like a "status quo power" and remained indecisive whether it should take the lead or otherwise. Though India had improved its relations with Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan but its relations with other regional countries, particularly Pakistan and Nepal, were not "supportive" to the spirit of regionalism (Baral 2006, 270). The SRCs wanted to overcome shortcomings of SAARC so that it could handle with political and strategic matters which were "directly relevant" for them. But these objectives remained less important for India which preferred to "limit to the status quo." This was the reason that the SAARC members such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal which had extensively contributed to international peace and security through participating in UN peacekeeping missions, could not play any role for the security and stability in South Asia. If and when some action was taken, it was at bilateral level, such as Indian intervention in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives. However, it also created conflict of interest of these states with India (Gooneratne 2007, 60) mainly because such interventions in neighbouring states manifested Indian hegemonic designs in the region.

The SAARC had failed to play any role in political matters related to its member states. The scholars including Cheema, Sudhakar, Naqash, Zaki and Ahmad agree that significant progress in South Asian regionalism was not possible "without easing political tensions" through resolution of bilateral political disputes such as Kashmir problem and other issues between India and Pakistan as well as ethnic and religious conflicts in the region (Kumar 2005, 30-1; Dash 1996, 206-7). SAARC has not been able to improve bilateral relations among its members. For instance, at times India and Pakistan downgraded their diplomatic relations, broke transportation and communication links between them and their armies faced eye-ball to eye-ball (Jha 2004, 117). In 2008, 2016, and 2019, India and Pakistan came to the brink of war due to militants attacks in Mumbai, Pathankot and Uri, and Pulwama, respectively. This state of affairs and recurrent tense relations between two nuclear states are attributed to the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir which New Delhi has refused to resolve amicably in a peaceful manner.

Several commentators and analysts have elucidated that excluding discussion of contentious issues and political problems at SAARC had made it a redundant regional organization. For instance, Cheema argued that excluding contentious and bilateral issues from discussion at SAARC forum made it an ineffective organization (1996, 318). Sudhakar (1994, 211) claimed that it not only made SAARC a non-starter but also caused a status-quo in the region. Naqash argued that such provision

“can no longer be a sensible course” (1994, 106). Zaki argued that members must use SAARC framework to discuss bilateral and contentious issues (1996, 61). Otherwise, Sudhakar argued, SAARC members must create a “regional conciliation committee or arbitration mechanism” (1994, 211). SAARC must “adapt itself to the new realities even if it means re-writing of its basic charter” (Ahmad 2007). Without progress on political side, SAARC would “experience only a stop-and-go pattern of growth” with limited chances of regional cooperation on “specific techno-economic issues” (Iqbal 1996, 105).

All members needed to do something to remedy this situation but India owed the largest responsibility. In fact, the “the problem is centred around India.” Therefore, it “needs to do a bit of back-bending for the sake of improved regional cooperation” (Sudhakar 1994, 207). However, Indian leadership “hardly had a heart in promoting SAARC when the exercise began in 1980.” Muni observed that a large number of former and present policy makers in India were “far too keen to bury SAARC unlamented.” It would not be in India’s own interests. “A dead SAARC at India’s behest,” he maintained, “will only make India’s neighbourhood policy more difficult and its international image more unpalatable” (Muni 2003, 188). Sundarji, a former Indian army chief, had said: India should focus on creating “a loose South Asian Federation based on the South Asian Regional Cooperation by 2010. We must carry Pakistan along as a major and honored partner in the enterprise. We must wholeheartedly support Pakistan’s right to develop a minimum nuclear deterrent” (1994, 144-5). General K. M. Arif, Pakistan’s former vice-chief of the army staff had advised: “To resort to war is a poor option to establish peace or even hegemony. It is counter productive to build up the security of one country on the insecurity of her neighbors. To achieve peace in South Asia, efforts should be made to win over hearts. And hearts cannot be won through conflict” (cited by Gupta 1996, 15).

The Indian leadership ignored the voices from within the country and the neighborhood to avoid aggressive postures towards regional states and carry them particularly Pakistan as an “honored partner” and prefer to win their hearts over coercing them in order to promote cause of regionalism. The history and current state of SAARC strongly suggests that the concerns and assessments of these scholars, analysts as well as the leaders of SRCs were true. The ineffectiveness rather failure of SAARC is manifested by its recent inactiveness as well as inability to convene its summit meeting in the last nine years, i.e. since 2014, against thanks to the stubborn behaviour of India which has refused to attend any such gathering in Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

New Delhi had different perceptions and preferences in the region. India’s founding fathers had envisioned a specific role for their country and wanted India to play a leading role in the global politics. It took SRCs as granted and showed no significant interest in promoting cooperation in the region. India took advantage of its power and location. It strove to imposed its domination on regional states. It did not expect too much from SAARC and gave it a secondary importance. Contrary to the demands of SRCs, India insisted to exclude contentious issues and bilateral disputes from discussion at SAARC forum. New Delhi preferred bilateralism over multilateralism in order to consolidate its predominance in the region. Even it was not serious in bilateral negotiations and wanted to maintain territorial status quo. India used bilateral means in its bid to extracts maximum benefits and imposed its policies and decisions on SRCs. Contrary to the expectations of the leaders

of SRCs, generally it did not show magnanimity, generosity and accommodation towards the needs and concerns of its co-partners in SAARC. Most of the time, India had tense relations with its neighbours which prevented SAARC from reaching agreements on important matters. Generally, it attempted to massively increase its power and build strategic and political ties with super powers to achieve its objectives. It gradually endeavored to create complementarity of interests with the US to seek its approval in playing a much bigger role in the world.

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. In fact, India was not sincere to promote SAARC since its very creation.

India's confidence in its national capabilities prevented it from pursuing a policy of accommodation and cooperation towards its neighbours. The rising political and economic power of India, compounded with its acceptance as a major player in world politics by the West especially the US, had enabled it to achieve most of its strategic and political objectives. Resultantly, New Delhi believed that the policy of accommodation and cooperation towards its smaller neighbours was unnecessary. New Delhi also felt that South Asia fell too short to meet its far larger ambitions and interests. India believed that its great power ambitions could be promoted through building extra-regional linkages and SAARC could do little to help in this regard. Thus, India did not bother too much about SAARC.

Apparently, there were no internal or external compulsions which could have forced India to change its policy towards regional states. India had enough national capabilities to advance its interests independently. The advancement of its objectives through bilateralism in the region and building alignment with key world players particularly the US could help achieve its interests. New Delhi rationally calculated its options and decided to grasp the moment. It skillfully exploited the opportunities, provided to it by history, in its favour. It could extract more benefits through unilateral and bilateral means and building extra-regional linkages than through promoting South Asian regionalism. Thus, it preferred the former over the latter because international politics is dictated by power and national interests and not by ethics and morality.

- The paper has been mainly extracted from the researcher's PhD dissertation titled "The Prospects and Problems of Regional Cooperation in South Asia: A Case Study of India's Role in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)" submitted at International Islamic University, Islamabad in 2013.

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Date of Publication

August 05, 2023