ABSTRACT

South Asia as a viable region and proceeded to study the evolution of SAARC as a regional organization of South Asia. The socio-economic and political dimensions of the states of the region, their internal problems, their interrelationships, the role and importance of the region in international relations and the impact of the global powers on the regional organization of the South Asia have been discussed in detail. An evaluation of the functioning of SAARC and the progress made by it during these years has also been undertaken.

The study started with a conceptual discussion of world war II and its consequences and arrival at a working definition of region. It indicates that there were strong factors in South Asia, like the geography, proximity, history, society, security perception and nation building process etc. commonalities in the social and cultural aspects and economic background. These factors and interference of the big powers in someway or the other paved the path for regional organization in South Asia.

The genesis of SAARC is also one of them. The origin of SAARC in its present form could be traced to the proposals mooted by the late President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh in 1980 followed by the circulation of Working Paper on South Asian Regional Cooperation in November 1980. The formal discussions for the establishment of an institutional mechanism for regional cooperation in South Asia started with the Colombo meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of the seven states of South Asian region, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in April 1981.
The evolution of regional organization in South Asia has indeed been very late in comparison to various other regions of the world, including other Asian regions. There were several reasons but the most important among them was India and Pakistan. The turning point in the evolution of regional cooperation in South Asia as the study indicates was the New Delhi Meeting of Foreign Ministers in August 1983 where an embryonic form of regional cooperation viz. South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) was launched. After a few more meetings at the Foreign Ministers level the formal launching of SAARC in its present form took place at Dhaka in December 1985. The Dhaka Summit of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Heads of States or Governments adopted the Charter of the SAARC and marked the beginning of the regional cooperation.

The institutional framework of the SAARC consist of a four-tier institutional set up. At the Apex level is the summit meeting which takes place once every year. The second tier of the structure is the Council of Ministers. The third one is the standing committee and the bottom line consists of Technical committees on various subjects of cooperation consisting of representatives of the member states. The SAARC Secretariate came into existence in February 1987 with headquarters at Kathmandu. It is headed by a Secretary-General and also consists of seven directors, one each from the member countries.

Most of the states of the region over the past six decades developed an adversary relationship with India. The basis for this is partly the bilateral
problems they have with India and partly it is psychological. This adverse relationship of the states of South Asia with India give rise to small states tendency and their fear of big Nation. As India is the largest of all the member states of the South Asia. Most of the bilateral issues revolves round India and other member states.

India-Pakistan bilateral relations occupy the centre stage of the South Asian relations. The major bilateral problems are India’s problems of Kashmir with Pakistan, river water disputes with Nepal, smuggling and sharing river waters problems with Bangladesh. Tamil insurgency and LTTE problem with Srilanka. These problems are purely bilateral and no other South Asian country has any role to play. India also played a positive role in SAARC by encouraging cooperation among the South Asian states. It has good relations with Maldives, Bhutan and also cordial relations with other South Asian states regarding the economic cooperation.

SAARC though a latecomer on the international scene, has been quite ahead of other regional organizations like ASEAN in matters of institutional framework. But the institutional mechanism established by SAARC is rather modest compared to other similar organizations like ASEAN and EU. While comparing SAARC with other regional organizations it is found that in most of the cases political, social and ideological convergence facilitated their evolution. In the case of SAARC in spite of the existence of social, cultural and ethnic commanilities, the strategic, ideological divergence stemming from religious divergence and antagonistic political postures are found to be causing
most of the damage to the unity of the region. However, the evolution of SAARC indicates the desire of the countries of South Asia to bring about a unity to realize the regional cooperation. By analyzing the above discussion this can be said that there is no problem about the general framework of regionalism as far as SAARC is concerned. Infact SAARC is quite in order as a regional organization of South Asia. Its need was felt for quite a long time and its actual emergence took longer time than other similar regional organizations. SAARC with its noble objectives is quite compatible with the ideals and objectives of the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement.

There is mutual suspicion among the member states of SAARC. Especially it was questioned how far Indian hegemonism in South Asia is real and how does it affect the Regional Cooperation in South Asia. It is quite true and that the basic reality of the size and strength of India in relation to its neighbours gave scope for this kind of suspicions in the bilateral relations between India and its neighbours. The mutual suspicions in the bilateral relations have their roots in the social, cultural, religious, ethnic and political factors. The suspicions were rather psychological and by no means insurmountable. Once they are removed there will be closer interaction between India and its neighbours both at the state level or at the state level.

The talk of Indian hegemonism or Indophobia has its roots in the bilateral problems between India and its neighbours. India’s ambitious foreign policy postures and its insistence of bilateralism in its dealing with its smaller neighbours is construed as dominant aspirations. But the fact is that India is generally keen in maintaining good neighbourly relations with all its smaller
neighbours. In fact India has been more interested in economic relations with its smaller neighbours. The problem of India’s big size is in actual an imaginary problem fostered by Pakistan for obvious reasons and actively supported by the external powers, particularly the USA and China. The talk of India’s big size is in a way assertion by identity by the smaller states of South Asia. This way they were more or less successful in wresting quite a few concessions from India apart from isolating it both within the region as well as SAARC.

As far as the influence of major powers are concerned. It is true that the major powers of the world like US, USSR and China have a definite influence on the SAARC. They were someway or the other responsible for the emergence of feeling of regional cooperation among the South Asian states. And in the recent time both China and USA got the observer status in SAARC.

The internal problems or turmoils in various states of South Asia is a major factor in fomenting troubles in the bilateral relations of these countries. Most of the problems are systematic oriented and they can be solved by introducing necessary changes and confidence building measures.

Another factor that has been influencing the progress of SAARC is small states tendency and their suspicion about India. Something has to be done by all the member states of SAARC to remove this dubious phenomenon which has created a lot of bad blood in the intra-regional politics of South Asia. As the problem is centred around India, India needs to do some efforts as discussed and proposed in Gujral Doctrine.
India needs to adopt a more accommodative approach in resolving the issues with its neighbours. The issues include Kachchativu with Sri Lanka, some disputed territorial enclaves, Ganga waters, and cross border migration with Bangladesh, and issues pertaining to Mahakali and Kalapani with Nepal. It is encouraging that some issues have been settled. Gujral Doctrine’ envisaged that India would go an extra mile to iron out differences with its neighbours. India has certainly adopted a positive approach and is constantly engaged in substantive dialogue with them. There is no substitute to dialogue. A composite dialogue to resolve all the differences with Pakistan is underway. Nepal and Bangladesh though not very friendly, are free to take their own stand on international issues as they perceive. Sri Lanka also dealt LTTE problem without India’s instruction. India will certainly be happy if peace and stability return to this Indian Ocean Island.

The expansion of SAARC has not only been confined to the Asian region, but it has also spread its wings outside the region. The United States government in April 2006 approached the SAARC Secretary General about its willingness to join the orbit of SAARC. In its twenty five years of history, it is quite unrealistic to believe that its achievements as a regional organization have been a history of failure. During these years SAARC’s performance has been mixed and its political leaders have met regularly and banked on informal discussions to address their mutual problems. These informal discussions produced some noteworthy results in South Asia. The informal talks between the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers at the second SAARC Summit meeting at Bangalore in November 1986 led to the diffusion of tension between
the two countries on the issue of India’s military exercise, operation Brass-tacks, on the Indo-Pakistan border, and the India-Sri Lanka talks at the 1987 SAARC Foreign Ministers’ meeting, leading to their accord on the Tamil problem. As a result of an informal meeting and discussion between Prime Minister of India and Pakistan, Narsimha Rao and Nawaz Sharif respectively, at Davos (Switzerland) in 1992, the Pakistani government took action to prevent the move of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) to cross the ceasefire line in Kashmir later that year. The Davos meeting was possible because of an earlier informal agreement between the two leaders at the sixth SAARC summit meeting at Colombo in December 1991. In this way SAARC on many occasions has displayed its expanding role. One of the important achievements that the SAARC has made during these years is that the Heads of State or Government at the Ninth SAARC Summit agreed, for the first time, that a process of informal political consultations would prove useful in promoting peace, stability, amity and accelerated socio-economic cooperation in the region. The leaders reiterated this intent during their Tenth and Eleventh Summits held in Colombo and Kathmandu respectively. As a result, the Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed in 1993 and four rounds of trade negotiations have been concluded since then. With the objective of moving towards a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU), the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was signed during the Twelfth Summit in Islamabad in 2004. It aims at the liberalization of regional trade by abolishing trade barriers and greater cooperation. In this summit, the signing of social charter, Additional Protocol on Terrorism and South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement are the three most important
achievements of SAARC. The signing of the social charter was described “a historic development, which would have far reaching impact on the lives of the millions of South Asians”. The issues covered under the Charter included poverty alleviation, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children.

Besides this, at the 12th SAARC Summit, the Foreign Ministers of SAARC signed Additional Protocol to the 1987 SAARC convention on Terrorism. The protocol was signed in the backdrop of 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Therefore, by signing the social charter, launching of SAFTA and acceptance of global obligations to suppress and eradicate terrorism, SAARC has become an eminent organization. If not only making progress in the areas of regional integration and social development but also showing willingness to share the responsibilities to fight the war against international terrorism. All these initiatives have encouraged the other countries of the globe to enhance the level of their interaction with SAARC members in areas like trade, investment, energy, infrastructure, education and security. This became the major basis of the desire of some countries like United States, China, Japan and European union to seek observer status in SAARC.

Despite the slow progress of regional cooperation in South Asia. The actual working of the SAARC since its establishment has raised high hopes of peace in this region be-devilled by conflicts of all kinds. It is true that at present South Asian regional cooperation is far from the stage where EU and ASEAN have reached, yet it cannot be denied that a small beginning has been made in
this direction, which would produce far reaching results in the future. The inception of the SAARC represents unity in diversity.

Though it is true that SAARC has been less successful to tap its full potential but it should be given time to grow and evolve. Twenty five years is a long period in the life of an individual but not in the life of an organization. Today all the member states are finding SAARC as a more acceptable forum for co-operation and have slowly changed their perceptions towards SAARC and core state India. India also has given up her initial hesitation and is today willing to undertake asymmetrical responsibilities without insisting on reciprocity as the address of the Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh highlighted at the 14th SAARC summit in 2007 (New Delhi).

The external interference also affects the success of SAARC as major powers like U.S. and China creates lots of misunderstanding between the two major states India and Pakistan of South Asia. Therefore it is necessary for South Asian countries that they should make SAARC a model of south. South Cooperation so that the South Asian states achieve collective economic self-reliance and progress. Now when both China and U.S. has joined SAARC as observer states it can be hoped that may be both countries will act positively and help in removing the misconceptions about them.

This would be necessary to take care of the concerns that SAARC visionaries had at the times of its inception that politically contentious issues might not mar the progress that could be made on other areas of social and economic significance. Such an approach would more in tune with the existing realities in South Asia.
There may be two fold advantages in this. First, it will be able to bridge the trust deficit that exists between India and other South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. A discussion on contentious issues in a regional forum often allows the much needed outlet that otherwise is not possible in either bilateral interactions where often stated positions get repeated; or multilateral forum where the threat of an external imposition always exists. As mentioned earlier, SAARC summits at times have been known to be great icebreakers at times when bilateral relations seem to have come unstuck in some cases. The ‘pressure valve’ role of SAARC must be formalized rather than remain an ad hoc one. India would definitely have to show greater openness and resolve in opting for the regional option as the bigger and more responsible actor in regional cooperation as it is often at the centre of controversy in many of the vexed South Asian issues. While SAARC may not become a problem solving platform as some of the problems in the subcontinent are endemic, rooted in deeper history and ideology, it can nevertheless become a starting point of key confidence building measures across the region. As the interests of external power (China and US) especially after the entry of Afghanistan in the grouping grows, internal coherence within SAARC has been of paramount importance.