Meetings of the Secretaries and Foreign Ministers to decide the format of the SAARC

Deliberations among Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India regarding the formation of a South Asian Regional Association took place and all of them accepted to cooperate each other to overcome their short comings and prosper together to achieve happiness of the people residing in the South Asia region. Foreign ministry of the interested States in South Asia region contacted each other through their diplomatic services and decided the points to discuss at various level meetings among the representatives of the states of the region.

Bangladesh took initiative and maintained contacts with India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives for exploring the areas of cooperation among them to form an institution, an organization and various agencies to implement the plans and the programmes mutually agreed upon by them. To convert the proposal of Bangladesh into reality many meetings among would be member states of SARC took place at Foreign secretaries level, and Foreign Ministers level and ultimately held a summit of Head of States or Governments.

At once the proposal of the SAARC by late President of Bangladesh Zi-Ur-Rahman was accepted, Bangladesh Government prepared the working paper and this paper was circulated in November 1980 to the would be member states of the SARC. The working paper specified the areas in which prospects of cooperation would be worked out for mutual benefits of the countries of the region. This working paper provided the format which provided ground for further discussions and
lead to the preliminary meetings held in Colombo (1981), Islamabad (1982) and Dhaka (1983), and ultimately lead to the declaration and launching of the SARC in August, 1983.

i) Proposals of setting of regional cooperation in South Asia:

The states in South Asia thought about the successful functioning of European Community and the ASEAN. They considered them as role models for establishing a regional cooperation in South Asia.

J.L. Nehru, who was first Prime Minister of India was a giant leader of World politics. He was of the opinion that South Asia region is a small region for the development and therefore he gave a call for Asian Relation Conference in 1947. It was, during the Janata Party Government of 1977-1979 which came forward with the thinking for regionalism and gave a way to the ideology of regionalism through its foreign policy.

The call of Bangladesh, the thinking of Indian Government regarding regionalism, the favourable response from Pakistan, Nepal's willingness to join it and the willingness of Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives created favourable atmosphere in which primary correspondence was made, in this correspondence the points chosen for discussion at secretary level were made clear.

ii) Meetings during 1981 to 1984:

Formal discussions began with the first meeting of foreign secretaries of the Seven States of South Asia 21st April 1991 and lasted upto 23rd April
1981 at Colombo. This Colombo meeting was a result of the response given by Sri Lankan Government to the willingness of other Six Countries to come together to form an organization for the common development of the region. A ceremonial atmosphere was created by Sri Lankan Government for the first meeting of Foreign Secretaries. Participants were cautious in involving an institutional frame work of Regional Cooperation.

a) Indian Secretaries’ and Foreign Minister’s role:

Bangladesh’s draft paper formed the basis of discussions at the first meeting of Foreign Secretaries held in Colombo in 1981. Indian Foreign Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao declared that India’s approach to regional cooperation is positive. Three more meetings of the foreign Secretaries took place - in Kathmandu (November 1981), Islamabad (August 1982) and Dhaka (March 1983). The Dhaka Meeting decided to hold the first ministerial meeting in New Delhi in August 1983. These meetings prepared the ground for regional co-operation, defined its objectives, identified areas of possible cooperation and recommended an Integrated Programme Action (IPA) in the agreed areas of co-operation.

First meeting of South Asian Foreign Ministers, New Delhi, August 1983

The ministerial level meeting was expected to endorse and put a Seal of political authority on the work done by foreign secretaries in their four meetings since April 1981. This was done by the foreign Ministers of the countries through the adoption of a “Declaration on South Asian Regional Co-operation” in New Delhi on 2

2. SAARC : Lok Sabha Secretariat, P. P. 4

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August, 1983. The declaration described the regional co-operation as "beneficial, desirable and necessary". It was hoped that while promoting socio-economic development and collective self-reliance, the South Asian Regional co-operation (SARC) would also contribute towards "friendship, amity and understanding among their peoples" and "mutual trust, understanding sympathetic, appreciation of the national aspirations of the countries of the region".¹

The foreign Ministers agreed to meet once a year to review the progress of South Asian Regional co-operation. They also decided to recommend to their respective Heads of State or Government that they meet at their level and agreed that the date of the Summit would be finalised at the next meeting of foreign Ministers.²

Second Meeting of Foreign Ministers, Male, July, 1984

As per the decision taken at their first meeting held in New Delhi, the Seven SARC foreign Ministers again met in Male (Maldives) on July 10-11, 1984, to review their work and plan for the future.

The ministers considered and endorsed the recommendations of the first and second meetings of the Standing Committee of Foreign Secretaries held in New Delhi (27-29 February, 1984) and Male (7-8 July, 1984) respectively.

In pursuance of the decision taken by them at their first meeting in New Delhi in August, 1983 the Ministers agreed to recommend a meeting of South Asian Countries in Dhaka in the last quarter of 1985.

¹ Op-Cit, P.P. 4
² Ibid, P.P. 7
The ministers agreed that the next meeting of foreign ministers would be held in the first half of May, 1985 and that it would serve as the preparatory meeting for the Summit.

The role played by Indian Foreign Secretaries and foreign ministers in the meetings was that of elderly brother and therefore they have taken lead to overcome the hindrances and problems which came on the way while taking final decisions. In fact Indian foreign secretaries and foreign Ministers considered that as a lead nation it is their responsibility to see that proper decisions are taken in time so as to fulfill the objectives of establishing SAARC would take place as earlier as possible.

b) Role of Secretaries and Foreign Ministers of the other states:

Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister of Bangladesh presented a draft of SARC and made every point clear to participants to have elaborate discussions. The attitude of the Secretary and Foreign Minister of Pakistan was to go slowly and cautiously. Pakistan Secretary and Foreign Minister advocated and lobbied in the meetings that "Let us build the structure of cooperation brick by brick and on solid and secure foundation" Nepal and Sri Lanka's Secretaries and Foreign Ministers were cautious and therefore, casted their votes after consultations with their Governments. Bhutan and Maldives Secretaries and Foreign Ministers simply participated, they did not contributed any thing which can be termed substantial but their positive casting votes were important in giving momentum to the working of the organisation and providing a mechanism to convert the dream of SARC into reality.

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1. Op-Cit, P.P. 7
2. E-Sudhakar: SAARC - Origin, Growth and Future, P.P. 20
iii) 1985 to 1987:

The establishment of SAARC on 7th - 8th December 1985’s meeting of the Heads of State or Government of the seven participating countries declared that hereafter SAARC member countries have adopted the Charter of the SAARC and will adhere to it to achieve the objectives of SAARC, United Nations and NAM. With this declaration the SARC became outdated and hereafter came to be known as SAARC. In the format of the SAARC the foreign secretaries of all the seven states were made members of the Standing Committee of the SAARC and therefore, hereafter no meeting of the Secretaries of the member states were held under the title ‘Foreign Secretaries Meeting’.

Secretaries of Member States expressed their attitudes, desires, proposal in the form of draft and had discussions on the resolutions were either passed or rejected by the majority of vote in the Standing Committee. The resolutions passed by Standing Committee were made a base for discussions and decisions were made in Foreign Ministers meeting. During 1985 to 1987 there were five meetings of Foreign Ministers of SAARC i.e. first at Thimpu on 13th-14th May 1985; and Second at Dhaka in December, 1985; third third at Bangalore on 17 November, 1986; fourth on 18-19 June, 1987 at New Delhi and fifth in November 1987 at Kathmandu.

a) Indian Foreign Minister’s Role:

In the Thimpu meeting India’s Foreign Minister persuaded other Foreign Ministers to set up the format of the Charter as per the Indian version.
In the Dhaka meeting Indian Foreign Minister made clear that all preparations are complete for official inauguration of the South Asian Regional Co-operation and proposed that the name of the regional organization should be South Asian Association For Regional Co-operation and lobbied successfully for conversion of SARC into SAARC.

In Banglore meeting of Foreign Ministers of SAARC countries Indian foreign minister has placed the idea of Secretary and his functioning for discussion and proposed that the Secretariat should be located at Kathmandu, Nepal and convinced participating Foreign Ministers that how Kathmandu is suitable for it.

In New Delhi meeting of foreign ministers the Indian Foreign Minister said that terrorism is a problem for the SAARC, states and particularly India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are suffering with this problem. He further clarified the causes and how slowly and steadily terrorism is inducted into Tarai of Nepal, Tamil dominated area of Sri Lanka, and Atolls of Maldives and therefore made the problem of terrorism as a universal phenomena in the region of the South Asia. The verdict of Indian Foreign Ministers regarding terrorism was given prominent place in the agenda of forth coming Foreign Ministers meeting in Kathmandu on 4th November, 1987.

At the opening session of the SAARC foreign Ministers' meeting in Kathmandu, on 31st Oct. 1987, Minister of State for External Affairs, K. Natwar Singh, reminds his counter parts of the external assistance, that collective self reliance is the primary objective of South -South Cooperation and that SAARC is committed to seek outside assistance only when it is not possible to mobilise our own resources under our
own terms and conditions” K. Natwar Singh has made clear that terrorist 'are macernaries and local ‘fall-out’ of the society. They are bent upon to over throw democratic set up of the state and create the state of confusion in the minds of citizen to fulfill their shallow desires. How they are helped by the foreign agencies in getting most modem equipments to fight the local police establishment and deployed military units. The Indian Foreign Minister also placed the plan of suppressing the terrorism in South Asia Region. Indian Foreign Minister also agreed upon establishing SAARC Food Reservation Centre.

b) Role of the foreign ministers of other states:

The role of the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives varied from each other, in the successive meetings held since 15th May 1985 to 4 th November, 1987. The attitude of the Pakistan's Foreign Minister was to slow down the process of establishment of Secretariat and functioning on various agencies of SAARC. For Sri Lanka terrorism was more important factor to be discussed and solved. Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka had consultation with other foreign ministers, secretaries and experts. SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrosion was held on 4th Nov. 1987. Following Foreign Ministers participated in it to seek the solution of terrorism:

1. Humayun Rasheed Choudhary
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   People's Republic of Bangladesh

2. Dawo Tsrin
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Kingdom of Bhutan

3. K. Natwar Singh
   Minister of State for External Affairs
   Republic of India

4. Fathulla Jameel
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Republic of Maldives

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5. Shailendra Kumar Upadhyaya
   Minister for Foreign Affairs and Land Reforms His Majesty's Government of Nepal.

6. Z. U. Noorani
   Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

7. A.C. Shahul Hameed
   Minister of Foreign Affairs Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

On the same day all these Foreign Ministers also agreed to establish the SAARC Food Security Reserve and appointed the SAARC Food Security Reserve Board to administer it, hereafter. Nepali Foreign Minister took initiative in offering site of Kathmandu for the construction of building which would hold all activities of SAARC, including day to day administration of Secretariat under the control of Secretary-General of SAARC. The proposal of Foreign Minister of Bangladesh to appoint Abul Ahsan, Secretary-General of the SAARC was approved unanimously by all the Foreign Ministers. Foreign ministers of Bhutan and Maldives actively participated in the discussions in all the meetings and voted along with the Foreign Ministers of other states to take all the decisions, unanimously.

iv) 1988 to 1991:

The activities of the SAARC regarding policy and action acquired importance at Standing Committee level and Summit conferences. The meetings of

1. Doc. of SAARC on Suppression on Terrorism, P.P. 7.
2. Doc. of SAARC on Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve, P.P. 2
Foreign Ministers of member states of the SAARC became the bridge between the Heads of the State and Secretary of the State and therefore Foreign Ministers meeting were held twice in a year. Important meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the SAARC countries were held in Islamabad in June 1990 on women's issue, meetings on narcotic drugs business and its related issues were held in November 1990, in Male Conference. In this Foreign Ministers meeting all the Foreign Ministers expressed solidarity among themselves to fight drug menace in South Asia and its related issues.

In 1991 meetings of Foreign Ministers international economic issue was the most important issue in agenda. All the Foreign Minister agreed among themselves to open their economic policy and markets for more trade traffic i.e. import and export among SAARC states.

a) Role of the Indian Foreign Ministers:

The Foreign Minister of India Vidya Charan Shukla played the role to perfection in the Foreign Ministers meetings held during 1988 to 1991. Particularly all the narcotic drugs and the problems related to it the call of Indian Foreign Minister to other Foreign Minister to unite to fight the drugs menace, to eradicate it from the soil of South Asia was worth of mention because the time of action of the Indian Foreign Ministers was taken as a guideline to chart out the action plan to fight out drug menace. Indian Foreign Ministers role in upgrading of women of South Asia and thereafter introducing her in the nation building as well as South Asia building through SAARC was well received from all Foreign Ministers.
b) Role of the Foreign Ministers of other states:

Foreign Minister of Maldives participated actively on women's issue even though it is totally Islamic state. Following traditional Islamic practices Maldives and Secular Bhutan are free from drug and its effects but their Foreign Ministers sympathetically expressed their oneness with other Foreign Ministers to fight drug menace.

Economy of Male and Bhutan is most negligible. Their economy is linked with Indian economy. Bangladesh and Nepal Contribute very little in term of world trade. Sri Lanka and Pakistan are moderate states. India is primarily dominant trade partner in SAARC as well as in the world trade. Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal wanted to keep their trade and business establishments linked with India, in tact and through India, they wanted to get themselves introduced in world trade. For this they wanted to make use of SAARC - platform.

The Foreign Ministers of Sri Lanka and Pakistan expressed their concern regarding narcotic drugs and their effect on their government and society. All the Foreign Ministers participated in the meeting held on 23rd Nov. 1990 at Islamabad and confirmed the resolution placed before them by Pakistan's Foreign Minister. The signatories were:

1. Anisul Islam Mahmud
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   People's Republic of Bangladesh

2. Dawe Tsering
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Kingdom of Bhutan

3. Vidya Charan Shukla
   Minister of External Affairs
   Republic of India

4. Fathulla Jameel
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Republic of Maldives
5. Devendra Raj Pandey
   Minister for Finance
   His Majesty's Government of Nepal

6. Sahabzada Yaqub Khan
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Islamic Republic of Pakistan

7. Harold Heart
   Minister of Foreign Affairs
   Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

They also united themselves with others to upgrade the position of women folk to give them equal status in the society.

Sri Lanka and Pakistan wanted to make use of the markets available in other SAARC countries to sell their goods, therefore to overcome their degrading economy by substantial trade and business in South Asia region.

The technological backwardness and the lack of industrial infrastructure in South Asia Region has made this region backward. To overcome the backwardness in this region and to solve international economic issues which were by-product of region's backwardness, all the Foreign Ministers of the SAARC states unanimously agreed to increase the exchange of technological know-how among themselves, to help each other to build the infrastructure for establishing industries and to create South Asia region as one market and to fulfil each other's needs. The Main objective of this scheme is to keep away world economic power and multi-nationals away from this area and making of South Asia as a self-sufficient region in Asia as well.

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1. Doc. Of SAARC on Narcotic Drugs And Psychotropic Substances, P.P. 21
as in the world. These proposals were finalised and brought into the shape of draft to be presented in the Summit Meeting.

v) 1992 onwards:

Foreign Ministers meeting of the SAARC states were held as follows:

1) Colombo, 1992  
   On children

2) New Delhi, 1992  
   On environment

3) Kathmandu, 1993  
   On women and family health

4) Islamabad, 1993  
   On disabled person

5) Male, 1994  
   On Youth

6) Dhaka, 1994  
   On Poverty

7) Dhaka, 1995  
   On Women

The Foreign Ministers of all the SAARC member states actually participated in all the meetings. After discussions they all came to the decisions which were placed before the relevant Summit meetings.

a) Indian Foreign Minister’s Role:

Indian Foreign Minister played the dominant role in all Foreign Minister’s meetings during 1992 to 1995. External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukharjee said in the meeting of Foreign Ministers Meeting that “Optimal regional cooperation has became a central strategy in many regions of the world. We should not be left behind in

1. Pub. SAARC Secretariate: SAARC at a Glance, P.P. 6
the dynamic transformations taking place in such regions. We have resources, people,
talent and capabilities to ensure that in ambitious cooperation, this region will not be a
backward at the dawn of the new century. India is a main contributor to the SAARC and
whenever the question of financial project arises the 'say' of India's Foreign Minister
acquires determining position and thus the Indian proposal placed before the meeting
gets approved.

b) Role of the Foreign Ministers of other States

The Foreign Ministers, May 1, 1995, endorsed the idea for the
formation of a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in the near future. Another
decision pertained to the establishment of a South Asian Development Fund by pooling
available resources with SAARC.

The Foreign Ministers meetings during 1992 to 1995 are marked
by Pakistan's role. Foreign Ministers of Pakistan tried to counter the moves of Indian
Foreign Ministers. Pakistan tried to compete India and thereby contested India for the
leadership of SAARC. Under the influence of Pakistan's Foreign Ministers some of the
Foreign Ministers countered and questioned the proposals of Indian Foreign Ministers in
relation to the programmes placed before the committee but strong backing by the
Foreign Ministers of Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal made India's position strong.

India particularly cared for Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal; with
Indian assistance telecommunication system is installed in Male to have direct contact
between the Governments of India and Male. In case of any calamity befalls Maldives

2. Ibid, P.P. 24803

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can immediately inform India. Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked. India on behalf of self and SAARC provided all the facilities for free transaction through its land for international trade and business. Thus India created a group within the SAARC at Foreign Ministers level and continued its dominant position in the SAARC. One such sub-region is likely to consist of the north eastern states of India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. The other would be the southern states of India, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

1. Times of India, dated 21st December, 1996