CHAPTER VI

SAARC - TOWARDS REGIONALISM

With its 101 members and the organizational structures designed to maintain and expand its global policy, and influence, the NAM could not efficiently resolve the local problems of the developing countries in various regions of the world. This as well as increasing number of members and many other factors compelled a pursuit for new forms of cooperation within the Third World. One of the answers was forming of smaller groupings of cooperating countries in particular regions of the world.

Most of the NAM documents issued in the course of successive proceedings of the movement while discussing the problems of the South - South cooperation and collective self-reliance stressed the importance of subregional, regional and interregional assistance and recommended formation of cooperating groupings.

One of these groupings is the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation. Its establishment was viewed and welcomed by the Harare summit as an effort of seven South Asian countries to start meaningful cooperation among themselves. All members of the association are also members of the NAM and the UN. The SAARC documents point out

1 Indian Express, May 17, 1989.
the adherence of the association to NAM principles and aims. The SAARC reveals the magnitude and proportions of problems interwoven in the mutual relationships among the developing countries, in this case the South Asian ones. It reveals also the magnitude of developmental effort they have to go through to come closer to the NIEO, in whatever shape it may evolve or perhaps in whatever shape the international community will evolve it. It is a micro-cosm of the developing world to test why its progress is not as fast as desired, necessary and expected.

For India the SAARC could be the epitome of a regional body she was pleading for and attempting even before her independence. It could also be instrumental in augmenting her economic and otherwise presence in her neighbourhood.

Political Situation in the Region

Yet, the circumstances under which the association has been initiated make its task a very tough one. The political fluidity, economic competitiveness, influence of great powers rivalry with all its consequences and difficulties negated her efforts at that time. In course of the years the situation in the region became much more complicated and difficult. Today in this strategically divided area are at play such factors like nonalignment, bilateral disputes, great powers pressures on and interventions in the Third World, and Indian Ocean area as a zone of peace,
super powers and other countries nuclear and conventional rivalry with all their nuances and implications. The states of the region differ sharply in their apprehensions and attitudes towards the various aspects of major regional and global problems of peace, security and stability.

As Indian scholars or journalists seldom fail to stress that India is a natural leader of South Asia by virtue of her size and potentialities, they also have to admit that she "has not been able to build the kind of economic power which could enable her to claim that status in effective terms" and she has "also worked against herself". As it was discussed earlier India was also not able to formulate a constructive policy towards her neighbours and instead of helping them overcome their apprehensions, suspicions, fears and misgivings towards her she antagonized them even further forcing them to embark foreign policies distancing them from her. To find counterbalance for India's weight they searched for alliances and links outside the subcontinent entering into treaty alliances with outer powers.

As a response, India, to counterbalance these steps welcomed countervailing extra-regional forces. Thus, by the shortcomings of her policy towards her neighbours India made it easier for the super power rivalries to enter the South Asian region negating the logic of nonalignment - the primary aim and principle of her foreign policy. This

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2 The Times of India, December 10, 1985.
she allowed to happen though the focus of her strategic interests had been to prevent this intrusion.

This strategic division on both global and regional planes placed India somewhat asymmetrical with her neighbours. The regional relations in South Asia, however, are basically Indo-centric, hence this configuration undermines the entire political climate in the region obstructing the cooperational endeavours. The changes which could be possibly brought about by regional cooperation may threaten the survival and prosperity of various vested interests that have established themselves as a result of entering into extra-regional associations and policies aimed at maintaining distance from India. These vested interests have over the years supported the regimes in their countries. Thus the reservations of these political regimes as to whether to allow closer ties with India are reinforced by the fears of the vested interests in other fields, like trade, industry, etc. which are at present out of the scope of the SAARC.

The SAARC, though gradually gaining ground, did not lessen the regional strategic discord. Quite opposite, this rift is widening. The region is not allowed to consolidate. It seems that the problems are being helped to become more and more complicated as evidenced by the revival of the regional conflicts in the last years along with the evolution of the SAARC.
Searching for answer whom to blame goes beyond the limits of this thesis. But certainly unless there is an internal source of discord there is no pretext for an external factor to interfere.

SAARC as a program for regional cooperation and collective self-reliance in South Asia has far-reaching consequences for the Third World as a whole. Almost all of the Third World development dilemmas are present in the South Asian region and virtually all types of interest of the developing countries in the context of the North – South relations:

1- the least developed,
2- the most seriously affected,
3- the primary commodity producers,
4- countries seeking to promote industrial exports,
5- island developing countries,
6- land-locked countries.

The complex political context of the SAARC compelled the consensus among the member countries to exclude bilateral issues from the agenda of the association. The new regional body is aiming at creating a complex web of productive and mutually advantageous interrelationships which would entangle the South Asian countries in a system of interdependence. It is expected to create such social and economic relationships of profit and advantage that would involve heavy losses if allowed to break or weaken. This
again would necessitate political compromises.

Thus the SAARC has a capability to become an institution under the aegis of which the problems of internal instability, regional harmony, understanding and cooperation could be dealt with. Yet the prevalent political ethos, nature of the governments, the inter-state problems and strategic stakes of the extra-regional powers are so interwoven that they may make it difficult for the association to grow in prominence, area of activities and influence, as a viable instrument to create regional interdependence and not dependence, as well as harmony and self-reliance. Thus till today it is mainly limited to dealing with peripheral problems, various kinds of meetings and paperwork. Yet the meetings on various levels create beneficial climate and bring closer the standpoints of the parties involved. According to the Secretary General of the association the process of confidence-building is the most important task of the SAARC at the moment.³

Social Aspect of Regional Cooperation

B.R. Bhagat, former Indian foreign minister, indicated at poverty being the common and main problem of all the seven South-Asian countries now working for evolution of

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³ Interviews with the SAARC secretary general, Kathmandu, September 1988.
SAARC. The NAM programmes as well as the NIEO programme did not pay enough attention to this problem of poverty within the developing world, to the efforts to solve internal problems on their very roots.

As it was discussed earlier, development in the Third World countries has hitherto been promoted by marginalising vast masses of population and intensifying the internal tensions in the countries concerned. It continues like that despite the growth imperatives demanding intense involvement into the developmental process of the immense human and natural endowments and physical capacities of the developing countries. So internal changes are necessary to cope with the developmental compulsions and they have to be introduced by the developing countries themselves. It has been stressed by Deputy Secretary General of UNCTAD, that "South - South cooperation schemes and projects must be more "bottom - up than top - down".5

A short glance through the text of the Integrated Programme of Action adopted by the SAARC summit conference in Dhaka in 1985 indicates that the stress of the association is on the building up of infrastructures and services aimed at improving living standards of the wide section of the populaces in the member countries.

The Integrated Programme of Action includes both,

short - and long - term programmes for development of agriculture, rural development, health and population activities, postal services, sports, arts and culture, telecommunications and transport, as well as of meteorology and scientific and technological cooperation. 6

Core fields of economy like industrialisation or trade are kept out of the scope of the association, though recent years show some more interest in establishment of joint ventures. Reservations, expressed earlier to this form of cooperation, remain valid. Improving of infrastructures and of the quality of population, which is the carrier of any progress, in the SAARC countries seems to be more important than rushing towards cooperation in such demanding areas like industrialisation or trade.

**Expectations of the Smaller Countries from SAARC**

The establishment of SAARC aroused tremendous amount of euphoria and expectations for positive economic changes to come true thanks to the the association. Nepal considers it as the priority of her foreign policy. 7 She has invited the headquarters of the association to her capital which is

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6 Dhaka Declaration of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, publ. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, December 9, 1985, pp. 33-34.

7 Sridhar Khatri, From the Dept. of Political Sciences, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, in the interview in September 1988.
today the site of the General Secretariat of SAARC. It is feared there, however, that it will lose popular interest if it does not show concrete results soon. 8

The Bhutanese king views it as a "new dimension in our foreign policy perspectives. We now have a forum for regular dialogue and consultation on matters of common interest". 9

The smaller countries acknowledge India as a power on which depends the future of SAARC and look towards her with hope. They are of the opinion that the initiative has to come from India to resolve the bilateral problems and relate to a large extent the future success of SAARC to India's behaviour in handling of the existing bilateral problems. Let is be illustrated by the words of the heads of some regional countries: The late General Zia ul Haq said at the Dhaka summit conference: "There is more than one factor that is common to all. There has been only one aspect and that is the India factor. India with whom we would like to join hands and be in the mainstream and play that much of the role which can generate confidence rather (than) fear for smaller neighbours. But unfortunately it is only India which has some sort of dispute with every country". He said further: "Through SARC 10 we hope to

8 Ibid.
9 Kuensel, Thimpu, November 22, 1986.
10 Before 1985 the name of the association was SARC: South Asian Regional Cooperation.
convince India that it must take measures to play its part as the centre figure in South Asia but with the recognition that there is nobody big or small. They are all equal independent autonomous states. India must also realise that it is the smaller states which have the greater ego. It won't cost India to play a low profile and generate confidence in others. Let India buy something from smaller countries. And only in this way we can live in peaceful coexistence". 11

President J. Jayawardene: "India, the largest in every way, larger than all of us combined, can, by words and deeds create the confidence among us so necessary to make a beginning". 12

King Jugme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan opined that regional cooperation could be enhanced only by removing what he called the main obstacle of not only psychological and emotional barriers of the past but also the fears, anxieties and apprehensions of the present. 13

King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal observed that after "a long winter" of mistrust, coldness and suspicion, the countries of South Asia were moving towards reciprocity, give-and-take and live-and-let live. 14

All of them stressed the factor of trust, confidence building and overcoming misunderstandings which have assumed "enormous" proportion.\textsuperscript{15} As it was mentioned earlier, the SAARC's Secretary General sees the role of the association at this juncture mainly as an instrument of confidence building. This is rather disappointing for some who view the situation as follows: "Tragically, however, the SAARC has been turned into a mere discussion forum, rather than the control guiding force to promote collective self-reliance in the region".\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{India's Response}

At the Dhaka summit conference India called for strengthening of the SAARC as a forum to carry on the non-aligned objective to create collective self-reliance among the South Asian nations. Indian prime minister made all necessary noises saying that regional cooperation "points the way to collective self-reliance in order to overcome problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and disease in the area". "SAARC gives practical form in our region to the declaration on collective self-reliance adopted at the New Delhi NAM summit".\textsuperscript{17} The Indian prime minister

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Hindustan Times}, December 7, 1985.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Patriot}, August 22, 1986.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Statesman}, December 8, 1985.
also talked at Dhaka about SAARC as an additional dimension to be fitted into the respective foreign policies of the member countries. 18

Yet, it is not political rhetoric which is the criterion of testing of political behaviour and intentions but facts. For this purpose two case studies may illustrate the trend in India's behaviour and intentions towards weaker countries.

Relief Airdrop Over Jaffna

The 1987 Indian airdrop of relief for Tamil insurgents over Sri Lankan Jaffna peninsula can serve as an instance of Indian way of solving regional problems. The relief airdrop took place a few days before the scheduled meeting of the SAARC foreign ministers in July 1987. It was considered by Sri Lanka as a violation of her sovereignty and raised the possibility of an indefinite postponement of the conference. The conference, however, was held thanks to intense last-minute diplomatic efforts, but the incident exposed the fragility of the SAARC itself.

Should Indian action therefore be regarded as a deliberate exercise to explore how far she can move in provoking her neighbours, or as an exhibition of her attitude towards smaller states, or as a demonstration of her political will?

Indian conduct posed the question of raising of contentious bilateral problems on the SAARC forum in a changed context. Though the UN Charter lays down the rules of international behaviour and decrees respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states the Sri Lankan foreign minister suggested a regional convention on the conduct of inter-state relations among the SAARC members to search for additional guarantee for their security finding the existing ones not sufficient. He proposed that such a convention should "bind the seven nations by a solemn declaration to respect one another's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity by refraining from any acts of aggression, interference, violations and oppressions".19

Recent Developments in Indo-Nepali Relations

The history of negotiations and implementation of the transit and trade treaties has been discussed above. The dispute is deepening every day forcing both parties to more extreme positions. In the process problems of trade and transit facilities between the countries have been linked with other issues which India and Nepal do not like in the behaviour of each other. The Nepalese embassy in London charged India of "arrogance and selfishness" and "adopting a bullying attitude towards its small neighbour"20

20 Indian Express, April 15, 1989.
The Nepalese spokesman said that the dispute between both the countries should not be narrowed down to trade and transit. The problem has gone far beyond this and necessitates the whole scope of Indo-Nepalese relations to be reviewed which is what Nepal is asking for, but getting no desired response, declared that her foreign minister would have no time for talks on the trade and transit issues in June.

There are too many gaps in information that the background to the present situation is not fully understandable. India's actions show clearly that she wants to revert to a single treaty with Nepal, for both trade and transit. In this context one could ask if one country can unilaterally abrogate treaty obligations towards another country, especially when the latter is a relatively weak landlocked country.

The official interpretation of the state of affairs is that as soon as the transit treaty lapsed India has no more obligation towards Nepal, even as a landlocked state, so she could close all but one or two transit points and stop her essential supplies. This is despite all the rules which give the landlocked countries the right of

21 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
access to and from the sea and the freedom of transit through a transit country. After the introduction of the Convention on the Law of the Sea of which India is also a signatory the trend in international law is to understand transit facilities for a land-locked country not as priviledge but as a right.

By denying Nepal her transit rights or circumscribing them India flouts the international convention on transit rights. From here she can move to do the same to any other international rule whenever she will find it desirable. The comment given to the Jaffna airdrop applies in this situation also. But let us quote what one of the senior Indian scholars thinks about it: "The substantive issues in the present Indo-Nepalese crisis are much bigger than the government would like us to believe". 26

Recent developments in Indo-Nepalese relations exposed again either insufficiency of the rules of the international law or India's contempt for them and tendency to dictate her own conditions.

India's relations with her neighbours can be considered as a criterion of her intentions and understanding or utilising of South - South cooperation, colective self-reliance, ECDC, TCDC et. for her various aims. Through her relations with her neighbours it is possible to see

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
and estimate the intentions and trends in her international behaviour as such, the climate she creates in the region, the quality of contribution towards the general culture of international relations, her contribution towards global peace.

Concluding Remarks

The SAARC in all its aspects arouses world-wide attention. It reflects a quest for an answer whether these countries are able to overcome the results of the big power rivalry and exercise their independent policy, to find a balance among the decisive regional factors and their own way to reach their objectives.

The SAARC's ability to exercise its own independent policy can have implications transcending the limits of the region itself as it can be considered as a touchstone of the Third World countries' chances of their developmental endeavours.

It can be also considered as a touchstone of the nonaligned movement to show the degree of the nonaligned countries' non-alignment or alignment, and its residual significance.

SAARC's progress or lack of it can be also taken as a criterion to test India's policy, cooperation or otherwise, towards her neighbours.

The concrete results of SAARC activities have not
been particularly impressive as yet. It is generally attributed to a lack of political will and mutual suspicions and apprehensions. The necessary political will is not forthcoming. The internal incompatibility is keeping the association so far at a low level of cooperation. Yet, all difficulties notwithstanding the global and regional political and economic situation made the regional co-ordinated effort in South Asia a necessity.

The comments about SAARC are rather pessimistic. The commentators still ask the same question, possibly searching for new solutions. But their queries indicate that they are not able to escape the conventional way of thinking.

Whatever could be said about the SAARC, its chances, future, problems, ways, methods, endeavours, etc. what has to be kept in mind is the fact that the association is a new form of cooperation and coexistence, a new dimension in the international relations of each of the members and in the global system of international affairs.

The political situation in the region may not be too favourable for economic or, for that matter, any cooperation at the present moment. Along with the very fast changing world the region is also in the process of transformation. All the elements, old and new, in this process demand new approach and generally open minds. Old concepts are no longer applicable here.