Regional cooperation in South Asia although late in coming, has at last made a start and acquired an institutional base. Looking back over the years, it seems clear that the quest for a stable equilibrium in South Asia has been conditional as much by domestic development in the countries of the region as by pressures exercised by extra-regional powers. The genesis of the idea of cooperation among the countries of the South Asian region lies in the recognition of their common geographical contiguity and common economic problems. The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia which was first mooted by the then Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman in 1980 culminated in the launching of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in December 1985.
at the regional summit held in Dhaka. Represented by all the seven member nations, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka the summit underlined the resolve of the participating Heads of State or government in the 'non-use of force' and 'peaceful settlement of all disputes'. Correspondingly the summit stressed the need for mutual developmental cooperation and laid a major thrust on resources development through technical and scientific cooperation. The creation of SAARC was seen as something of a landmark in the affairs of South Asia. Regional cooperation in South Asia is founded on the search among developing countries to break out of the pattern of domination and dependency which had constricted the growth and diversification of their economies. All the South Asian countries are engaged in the task of economic and social transformation. The charter of SAARC defined the objective of the SAARC as (i) to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; (ii) to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals with the opportunity to lead the life in dignity and to realize their full potential; (iii) to promote and strengthen


collective self reliance among the countries of South Asia; (iv) to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems; (v) to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; (vi) to strengthen co-operation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interest; and (viii) to co-operate with international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes. The Charter also established that each member state would have the power of veto, with all decisions requiring unanimity; "bilateral and contentious" issues would be excluded from the organisations' deliberations.

SAARC has acquired final shape and recognition not only in the region but also in the world over the years since its formal inception at Dhaka in December 1985. Though the progress so far has been rather tardy and unimpressive, the enthusiasm for promoting cooperative endeavours in the common quest for accelerated socio-economic development of the region through the optimum utilization of their human and natural resources is obvious and overwhelming. But all the member nations have to be very careful about the functioning of the Association as Rajiv Gandhi said at II Summit at Bangalore in November 1986, "Like embroidery, regional

4. Ibid.

5. Upadyaya, Rajesh Kumar, 'India's Perception of SAARC', in Link, March 8, 1992, p. 23.
cooperation will have to be fashioned patiently, stitch by stitch. The strength of the fabric will be determined by the weakest of the threads." Though South Asia is the best defined sub-system of the post-war international system, its power structure or alignment is not as easily conceived. Prior to the emergence of Bangladesh, the South Asian power alignment was bipolar; the axis of conflict was provided by Pakistan and India. Even now, South Asia is a semi-bipolar sub-system. The crucible of South Asian relationships is the state of affairs between India and Pakistan. Pakistan has cordial relations with the other countries of South Asia. It shares no border with any of them. Its ability to influence the other South Asian states is either very limited or nil.

The member nations of SAARC in Bangalore in November 1986, called for the expansion of regional cooperation to economic areas and rededicated themselves to working for peace and stability in the countries afflicted with mistrust and suspicion and the 'scars of the colonial era'. The seven leaders called for an offensive against terrorism and drug abuse and expressed their concern over lack of progress towards

disarmament. Rajiv Gandhi appealed the nations of the region to ensure that their territory was never used as a sanctuary of launching pad for terrorism anywhere in the region. Notable among other decisions taken were the creation of a Secretariat in Kathmandu and agreeing to launch a 'South Asian Boardcasting Programme' covering both radio and television - a valuable instrument in rousing South Asian consciousness. This consciousness did not originate out of a shared extra-regional threat perception. On the contrary, the region was bedevilled by an intra-regional threat perception and consequent distortion of inter-state relations marked by mutual distrust, tension and sometimes even armed conflict. Bhabani Sengupta's observation in this regard are extremely significant, "The gensis of the South Asian sub-system of states - partition of the sub-continent - created dark clouds of suspicion and distrust between India and Pakistan. These were reinforced by three wars and numerous small clashes of arms, and a nearly uninterrupted exchange of verbal invectives."

An active engagement in confidence building measures of all sorts is a necessary recipe for regional cooperation together with a willingness to reduce economic and trade barriers and progressive


elimination of obstacles to cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

In November 1987, the Heads of State and Government of South Asian nations met in Kathmandu, Nepal. It was the third summit. The summit reviewed the overall progress made by the various implementing agencies of SAARC. As for common denominators in the region, all South Asian nations share identical views on various global and regional issues. All are non-aligned, and have anti-colonial, anti-apartheid, and anti-protectionist orientation, and all subscribe to non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. All accept the UN resolution declaring the Indian Ocean area as a zone of peace. The Kathmandu Summit saw a definite pull towards a political issue - that of suppression of terrorism in the region. It saw the signing of the regional convention on suppression of terrorism, accomplished. The convention specifies the offences that could be considered as acts of terror, and not political, for the purpose of extradition. However, as both legal experts and political commentators have pointed out, mere signing and ratification of the convention will not achieve


objective. It would still require a genuine desire and political will to curb the menace of trans-border terrorism. That the region has resources which can be mobilised was demonstrated at the Kathmandu summit when the agreement on an emergency food security reserve was signed. This was an important move in the non-political areas.

The Fourth Summit of SAARC was convened in Islamabad in December, 1988. The seven Heads of state and Government adopted the Islamabad Declaration on 31 December, 1988 which took the regional body a step further to recognise the need for stronger economic cooperation. The summit pledged to stamp out terrorism and meet the basic needs of the people through a regional plan, SAARC 2000, with specific targets. It is meant to pool the resources of the member states to provide the basic needs of the people of the region. The concept places emphasis on the human dimension in development planning by focussing attention on meeting basic human needs of the people such as primary health care, literacy and shelter. All that is necessary is that SAARC should renounce its presently exclusive concern with economic forms of cooperation and its decision to abstain from bilateral

13. Sharma, L.K. 'From Kathmandu to Islamabad' in op.cit., p. 4.

and contentious issues and face the fact that economic commonality of interests among SAARC members must be strengthened by a political and strategic community of interests. Towards this end, the SAARC summit at Islamabad in December 1988 can be regarded as having made a signal contribution. The Final Declaration of this summit gave expression to several concerns which came within the ambit of the political security interests of the SAARC countries. Not only did the Heads of state or Government re-affirm 'their abiding commitment to the purposes and principles enshrined in the UN Charter, particularly those enjoining respect for the sovereign equality, territorial integrity and national independence, non-use or threat of use of force, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of all disputes', they also noted that 'escalation in military expenditure was a major constraint on world development. Equally significant for the political future of SAARC was the mention of the attempted coup de'etat in the Republic of Maldives on 3 November 1988. A great cohesiveness in political terms was seen among the SAARC countries at this summit, which did not exist to the same degree in their previous meetings.

The fifth SAARC Summit at Male took place after a lapse of two years when the leaders had met in Islamabad in December 1988. It started on November 23, 1990 with an agreement on restructuring the SAARC activities. Prime Minister of India Sri Chandra Shekhar observed, "A new era should start. SAARC meetings should not be just exchange of formalities not a diplomatic formality, but we should address ourselves to the problems of the people because mere diplomatic formalities are not going to bring a new hope, a new confidence and new trust among the people of this area." The Male Declaration adopted at the conclusion of the Summit, said that the leaders of the seven SAARC nations, unequivocally agreed to make their organisation 'vibrant and result oriented' and would henceforth display a more business-like approach to their deliberations. The Summit also witnessed the signing of the SAARC convention on narcotic drugs and psychothropic substances that binds the seven nations to effectively check drug abuse and drug trafficking. It was also approved to set up three important regional institutions - Nucleus Human Resources Development Centre at Islamabad, the Regional Tuberculosis Centre at Kathmandu and the Regional Documentation Centre in New Delhi. The SAARC came under


trouble when Colombo summit, which was to be held in November 1991, was postponed indefinitely due to inability of King of Bhutan to attend the summit. Then on 21 December 1991, a one day summit was held. The consensus that the SAARC leaders reached over a host of economic and politico-economic issues was by no means an unusual occurrence at SAARC summits. Yet the agreements assumed considerable significance in the light of the recent developments in the regional forum. The need to curb terrorist activities, the Maldivian initiative to seek international consensus on reinforcing the securing of small countries, the call to take effective steps to combat narco-terrorism in South Asia were discussed. The leaders of member nations also pleaded to articulate a collective stand on global and regional environmental issues. Prime Minister of India told his South Asian colleagues that "What we need is confidence between our peoples and between our governments to set in motion a benevolent cycle wherein cooperation strengthens confidence which, in turn, makes for closer cooperation."

After two postponements, the Seventh SAARC summit was held on April 10 and 11, 1993 in Dhaka with active participation of

all the seven members. The main issues that dominated the summit deliberations were: the proposal for a South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), the issue of poverty alleviation, child development and the move towards a South Asian Development Fund. An important feature of the 'Dhaka declaration' was the adoption of the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) framework which envisaged the creation of new trading arrangements for the member countries of the SAARC. It can be considered as a precursor to a South Asian free trade zone. On the political agenda, the issue of terrorism was the main focus. The Bhutanese King described terrorism as a "scourge of the region" and appealed to the summit to condemn the menace in all its forms. He underlined how terrorism deters a country's economic development. The leaders reiterated the necessity of framing appropriate legislations at the national level to enforce the earlier SAARC regional convention on suppression of terrorism. It was decided that the issue should be settled before the next summit in 1994. Another crucial issue that always dominated the minds of the SAARC analysts is the role of India within the regional grouping. The sheer size and potential of India (it occupies 77 per cent SAARC area and 76 per cent of the total SAARC


population, with a huge industrial base) always creates a fear-psychosis in the minds of other partner countries. They always complain about India's 'big brotherly' attitude. Given this, it becomes a major responsibility for India to dispell the fears among other member-countries. One cannot bypass a simple but hard reality that any success or failure of the SAARC rest on the attitudes and policies of India towards it. Indeed, without India's active participation the SAARC would be robbed of its very meaning. Any objective cooperation among South Asian nations hinges on the generation of friendship and trust through closer interaction among the people. Keeping it in view, India has strongly advocated to turn the SAARC from the movement of governments to people's movement. Obviously, a beginning has to be made by turning over the chapter of the past that has been full of bilateral animocities. The post-cold war era has made regional cooperation imperatively inevitable. Interstate relationships in South Asia do not fall into a uniform mould. The experiences of the post-independence period do not illustrate an inevitable future pattern. Variables in internal and external circumstances suggest different possibilities. There are different patterns of relationship. But no single model drawn from history

or from the experiences of the contemporary world is wholly
applicable in South Asia today.

The world is changing so fast and so radically that
regional relations cannot continue to remain at the prevailing
pace and level. Accordingly, there are signs of change and dyna­
mism in South Asian regional relations in some significant respects.
Among the contributing factors behind this is the impact of global
economic activism on the one hand and the upsurge of democratic
aspirations in the countries of the region, on the other. The
former is forcing a realisation on the South Asian countries that
without building closer economic cooperation among themselves they
would be side-lined in the world-wide drive for development.
India's South Asian neighbours feared such interaction might become
yet another channel for India to dominate them politically and
economically. It was suspected that they would lose their specific
identities and profitable third country relationships by getting
closer to India. Many of these fears are now gradually melting away
under international compulsions and domestic transformations. As
far as the U.S. approach towards South Asia is concerned, it is
bilateral improvement of relations with individual states and not
to poke its nose in regional issues. In the ultimate analysis,
it should be mentioned that the hub of intra-regional cooperation

26. Mansingh, Surjit, India's Search for Power: Indira Gandhi's

27. Muni, S.D., 'Friends in Need: New Realities in South Asia'
is largely shaped by politico-strategic compulsion. The legacy of history and divergence in political systems and security perceptions have contributed to the atmosphere of distrust in the region. At any given time India has had problem with one or another of its neighbours. So India will have to work out a proper balance between its past regional security sensitivities and hopes and aspirations for an improved atmosphere of regional and bilateral cooperation in South Asia. Increased cooperation contacts and exchanges among the countries of the region will contribute to the promotion of friendship and understanding among their people. The South Asian countries are practically forced to demonstrate in their actions the importance of regional cooperation for gainful development. However, a lot remains to be done in order to make such cooperation really effective in promoting the welfare of the people of South Asia and improving their quality of life. The desideratum for the countries of the region is to pay attention to changed realities of post-cold war era and to adjust their mutual relationships accordingly.

28. Ibid., p. 51.


CONCLUSION

The South Asian region is one characterised by extraordinary, geographical, political and socio-economic diversity. The problem of maintaining political stability and institution building are compounded by massive strategic, economic and demographic postures. The region accounts for a mere 2% of the global income, but needs to support 22% of the global population. Except for the atoll state of Maldives, the six states of the region belong to one land mass with a bare shallow stretch of the Palk straits separating, Sri Lanka. Besides, the built-in problems of land frontiers, ethnic and cultural contiguities of India with these states, necessarily involve a meshing of concerns affecting political relations of each of these states not only with India but also with the extra-regional powers. Each problem has a different history and a
different background, leading to variations in the quality of the relationships - and rendering a uniform approach to solve them, an unachievable ideal. The region is characterised by different social systems, very uneven levels of development, clashing ideologies, political, territorial, economic and ethnic disputes and prides and prejudices. The reality in South Asia is also that it is a region of historical mistrust, endemic tension and occasional hostilities, most, if not all, of which have their origin within the region. Yet another aspect of reality is that domestic turmoils resulting from the complex and traumatic processes of nation-building in most of the countries, with or without crossborder ramifications, have compounded the fragilities and distortions in interstate relations in South Asia. While developed countries have been able to establish economic cooperation and political alignments, separatist movements threaten South Asia. There is problem of ethnic minorities in different countries, like the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka and Chakma problem of Bangladesh, while Pakistan encourages terrorism in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, it is itself being racked by Sind and Pakhtoon movements.

Undoubtedly, the major problems of South Asia emnates from the continuing antagonism between India and Pakistan. The tragedy of the region is that since 1947, India and Pakistan have not
only remained consistently antagonistic towards each other but have also fought three major wars and even during periods of peace opted to remain closer to the brink. Many issues, somewhat regularly, contributed towards the frequently acknowledged 'undesired friction' and hardened the existing edifice of distrust. Some of these disputes are the issues that were the products of a hasty surgical partition of the sub-continent including the Kashmir dispute along with linked issues of Siachem, fundamentalism, nuclear development, periodic domestic troubles, and the involvement of outside powers. No other issue has generated so much ill-will between India and Pakistan as has been done by the Kashmir dispute. Even the Cold War and the consequent changes in world order have not been able to dampen the issue. The second major issue invoking security concerns is the nuclear factor. Both India and Pakistan are pushing each other into a nuclear arms race which can expose the whole of South Asia to new and more intense bilateral regional and global tensions. The Sino-Pak collaboration with regard to supply of M-11 Missiles to Pakistan and India's Frithvi and Agani missiles add fuel to the fire. The future of South Asia so much depends upon the equation between India and Pakistan.

South Asia's unique geographic location, internal strife and discord, external links, poverty, desire to modernise and obtain economic assistance from external quarters are the factors
that are responsible for a complex and shifting pattern of relationships among the South Asian countries. The pattern of relationship between India and its smaller neighbours has been a little troubled one. South Asia is unique in the asymmetries posed by the size and location of states. All the states of the region - Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan and Maldives - share territorial or maritime boundaries with India and none with each other. All of them together are smaller than India. Difficulties arise from perceptions of Indian proclivities and 'hegemonism'. In fact, each effort for instance, whether it be to sort out the problem of sharing Ganga waters or the question of Bangladeshi migrants or help to Sri Lanka solve its ethnic conflict appears to have driven India apart from its neighbours rather than lead to better understanding. With Pakistan too, the dialogue for carrying forward the process of normalisation proved futile. There is dissimilarity in the strategic perceptions too, held by different countries in the region. The imperative of jointly protecting the region from outside interference is ignored while they separately assess the intentions and capabilities of outside powers to harm or benefit them. The tragedy of the South Asian region is that it is a prisoner of its inevitable geography. India cannot help that it is big and powerful just like Bhutan cannot help that it is small or Nepal that it is landlocked. The South Asian Security system is an insecurity system, and the
each country is involved in minimising insecurity not maximising security. The only way out is to keep the channels of communication open which would not let crises cross the limits. India must work out a strategy to help its smaller neighbouring countries in defending themselves against external threats and aggression so that they can see it as a possible umbrella for their own security.

The big powers have played a decisive role in the subcontinental issues. They have involved themselves in the region both as actors and managers in different issues. Political weakness of regimes, cleavages between the regime and the people and extensive economic dependencies on the world capitalist system led by the United States expose the South Asian states to external influence and intervention. The major source which has contributed to the increased influence of outside powers is the tension due to asymmetrical power balance. With the cold war ending, peacekeeping in South Asia must be the concern of all the members of the South Asian regional community. But South Asia earned the dubious distinction of remaining the only region where the cold war continued to be well and alive, especially between India and Pakistan. There is growing use of fundamentalism for the political purposes. What is needed to counter terrorism is to counter the terrorist logic in the
individual minds or alienated souls. The policy of carrot and stick will have an impact. In a democratic society the military stick must be used sparingly and used only for extremely limited time with the purpose of restoring the political and legitimisation process within the constitutional confines.

There is rapid change in the world scenario. Accordingly, there are some changes in South Asian regional relations also. It is due to the global economic activism on the one hand and the growing democratic aspirations in the region on the other. South Asian countries have realised that without close regional economic cooperation, they can not move with the world-wide development, that is characterised by the evolution of closer trading blocs in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region; competition in transfer of technology and capital; and growing indifference towards the slow and inactive economies or the developing world. It is in this realisation and fear of being left out in the race for development that has led the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), after years of hesitation to venture into areas of hardcore cooperation. More and more South - South cooperation is needed. Another change is that in 1990s, the South Asia is emerging as unique region of democratic governments. India as the cradle of democracy in South Asia, has reason to be pleased with the triumph of democracy in the entire region. If democracy has a
first classical lesson, it is tolerance and mutual respect for the people's verdict. This is where a democratic South Asia needs to initiate a new regional career which, cultivated over time, may lead to the building of mutual trust and confidence, essential prerequisites for substantive regional understanding and cooperation.

South Asian regionalism is thus, both promising and worrying and its future would depend on how well the states of the region handle their affairs without the interference of extra-regional forces. That such a tendency is discernible in South Asia is evident from the way the South Asian nations, inspite of their conflicting linkages with the superpower system, have developed a model of cooperation without any super power patronage. SAARC affords a regular channel of diplomatic communication even at the highest level where much of the tension is defused. Regional cooperation can also help the countries of the area to balance their political relations with the world outside. The moral which stands out clearly from the experience of this recent past of the region is that if all the six states of this land-mass recognise and accept the territorial integrity of the region and its political imperatives it is possible to envisage a constructive and mutually reinforcing pattern of relationship, between India and its
neighbouring countries instead of any of the countries of the region being drawn into the vortex of major power politics over which they do not and cannot have any control. Cooperation to succeed must be an expression of the concerned countries. It should not be a 'sponsored cooperation' by big powers. Also it must be within a framework of a long-term perspective and must not arise out of temporary interests of the ruling elite and power-structure of the countries concerned. Since the roots of the security problems in South Asia are indigenous, the threat perception are sufficiently diverse to prelude a common approach. For India the major sources of threats continue to be China and Pakistan despite the march of normalisation processes and the advent of regional organisation. Similarly, for Pakistan and to a lesser degree, for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Nepal, the main threats emanate from Indian policy pursuits. The major security problem in South Asia is Indo-Pak hostility coupled with their differing security perceptions. Efforts should be directed to initially minimise the intensity of the hostility with a view to eventually eliminating it altogether. A joint India-Pakistan Commission is one such effort. Once the Kashmir dispute is resolved, India, Pakistan relations are likely to improve rather rapidly. The Indo-Pak detente leading to entente would not only eliminate all eventualities that tend to invite outside equalizers but would also radically improve the security situation in the region. No outsider could easily come into the
region if there was no exploitable situation.

Another thing which is urgently required is the advent of pragmatism in South Asia, more specifically, all the South Asian states need to adopt an attitude of regional pragmatism. Regional pragmatism implies flexibility in foreign policies within the region, promotion of realistic pursuits and cooperative ventures, according due considerations to each other's sensitivities and avoiding voluntary or inadvertent enmeshing of regional disputes with the big powers. Lack of regional pragmatism has denied the area the desired peace and harmony for the last four decades. Now the existing pattern of South Asia could be modified into a new one under which the SAARC members would minimize areas of conflict. For this the countries should not be over-zealous of their extra-regional links for balancing Indian pre-eminence because the smaller countries lack the capacity of neutralizing the influence of the big powers, once they start penetrating into the affairs of these states. The SAARC spirit alone can provide them with a sense of security if all the members agree on a common regional norm by being more realistic in their inter-state relations. It is clear that the efforts of SAARC for cooperation would be futile, if the degree of mistrust and strategic competition continues unchanged in their relations. The need is to create adequate political will among the leadership and the public of the region. The stress should be on the need
to give priority to economic goals rather than political postures. The fundamental values like, peace and security, amenity and prosperity, effective governance and democracy, protection of human rights, piety, tolerance, health, education, protection and promotion of cultural heritage, and self expression at home and abroad, should be practiced regularly by the states of the region.

India will have to work out a proper balance between its past regional security sensitivities and the hopes and aspirations for an improved atmosphere of regional and bilateral cooperation in South Asia. All the countries of the region together should galvanise a process of conflict control mechanism from within the region so as to minimise extra-regional control and hegemonism. Deep down the goodwill is there. If the countries of this region are closely bound together by such future ties as joint defence, a common union and joint planning, the people of this sub-continent could better serve their own interests as well as that of Asia and the world. Today, nobody can escape the logic of regional cooperation. It is the preferred model.