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Article in *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* · January 2013

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South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Its Role, Hurdles and Prospects

Irum Shaheen

Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract: *In the face of increasing importance of regionalism, SAARC stands unavoidable and significant organization in South Asia. Since its formation in 1985, it has played an important role by bringing the member countries closer together by holding various meetings and summits at various levels. Though overall development of this organization is marred by internal disputes and various other factors but still its establishment and the sense to develop regional integration has created a hope for its future progress. This research paper analyzes the role of SAARC. A critical evaluation has also been made of why SAARC has not been able to develop at par with other developed organizations like European Union (EU). The potential areas of cooperation have been pointed out and suggestions have been put forwarded for removing the existent hurdles and to move the wheel of integration in South Asia more fastly for improving the conditions of poor people in this region.*

Key Words: *SAARC, Pakistan, India, Regionalism, Integration, South Asia, Economic Interests, organization*

I. Introduction

The lingering legacies of South Asia's colonial past; uncontrolled human and other movements across sensitive, porous unsettled borders; ethnic and religious differences; intra-regional economic disparities and resultant bilateral disputes were some factors delaying establishment of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) until 1985. Its Charter ruled out "bilateral and contentious issues" from its agenda as a protective clause.

The world today is witnessing changes in terms of global and regional fundamentals. There is no denying the fact that the importance of peace and development through effective regional and global integration has become an important factor of these times.ⁱ The strength and development of the states today is not measured in terms of military and defence capacity but in terms of how a state is able to promote trade relations, investments and economic integration within the region and globally as well.ⁱⁱ

We see the impact of this importance of regionalism in South Asian in the emergence of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional cooperation). Wealth of human and material resources coupled with other common features like geographical proximity, historical backgrounds, commonality of social and political norms of development led towards the formation of South Asian grouping known as SAARC. It is important to note that the main idea behind SAARC formation was the promotion of political, economic and social interaction, common vision for using region's potential and interdependence to counter threats. Though unsuccessful in some fields, the overall assessment of SAARC performance shows not very negative trends but emphasizes the need to collaborate further by resolving all outstanding disputes among the member countries and to create understanding on stable basis. It is important to assess the origin, evolution and achievements of SAARC in detail.

II. Origin of SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an organization of South Asian nations, established on December 8, 1985. It is headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The very first proposal for establishing a framework for regional integration in South Asia was made by the late president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, on May 2, 1980. Prior to this, the idea of South Asian integration was discussed in at least three conferences: the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in April 1947, the Baguio Conference in the Philippines in May 1950, and the Colombo Powers Conference in April 1954.ⁱⁱⁱ The governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka formally adopted its charter providing for the promotion of social, economic and cultural development within the South Asian region and also for friendship and cooperation with other developing countries. Its seven founding members were Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh while Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Observer states include USA, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar, Mauritius, Iran and European Union. Meetings of heads of state are usually held on annual basis and meetings of foreign secretaries twice a year.

III. Achievements/Role of SAARC

In the past twenty six years, SAARC has made tremendous improvement owing to the interaction and cooperative efforts being put in by the member states. The progress and development of SAARC during the recent years can be looked at under the following headings:

3.1. Substantial Increase in Cooperation

Since the formation of SAARC in 1985, the level of cooperation among the member countries increased substantially. SAARC was established with the objective of improving the living standards of the people, cultural and regional economic growth and increasing cooperation with other regions of the world.^{iv} During the recent years, realizing the importance of regional cooperation and development, SAARC members have now created a sense of accelerating regional economic development and they advocate revival of the organization by moving from just the issuance of declarations to practical implementation of the plans and policies to turn this weak region into a potentially developed one. This recognition has led towards increasing the pace of cooperation among the member countries. This cooperation can be witnessed in the establishment and initiation of various programs and forums for mutual benefits.

- South Asian University, New Delhi
- SAARC International College, Bangladesh
- Agreement on Judicial cooperation on Counter-Terrorism
- Establishment of Food Bank
- Establishment of Development Funds
- Telemedicine Network
- SAARC Writers and Literature Foundation
- South Asia Foundation

Some other related centers include

- South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme
- South Asia Centre for Policy Studies
- South Asia Women's Centre
- South Asia Olympic Council (South Asian Games)

3.2. Economic and Trade Discussions

For the success of SAARC, economic and trade cooperation is very much important and infact the first thing to be focused on for the development of South Asia. Many years of discussions have at least established the bases of cooperation in this particular area. During the 1990s, SAARC discussed the Preferential Trading Area (SAPTA) among the member countries which was materialized in the shape of Free Trade Agreement which is now known as South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). According to this agreement, the tariff reduction plan was chalked out and since 2006, this reduction had been carried out in two phases. i.e Pakistan and India pledged to put tariffs on all the goods down to twenty percent within two years and all other countries to thirty percent within three years.^v While in the second phase, Pakistan and India decided to put the tariffs on goods down to 0-5 percent within five years and other members of the organization within seven years. Though the initiatives taken to trade freely in the region has encountered a lot of problem but still we cannot ignore that the member countries are proceeding ahead with their plans to improve the regional growth and cooperation.^{vi}

3.3. Increase in External Support/Cooperation with Observers

It is worth mentioning that being a poor region, SAARC countries cannot develop each and every aspect of their economies alone. They are in need of support and assistance in capital, resources, education and technology from the more developed regions and individual countries. One of the positive points in the recent years has been the interest of the other developed countries in SAARC who want to provide help in social and economic fields. The member countries have reached the conclusion during the recent years that they would welcome any assistance from the observer countries and being observers, USA, Japan, China, South Korea, Iran and EU are willing to provide support e.g Japan has clearly offered help in social infrastructure development and disaster management, China offered donation to South Asian Development Fund and the recent support has also come from China to run the China-South Asia Business Forum.^{vii} SAARC has established institutionalized arrangements for cooperation with a number of other regional groupings and international and regional organizations. SAARC has also been in the process of making agreements and MOUs with other regional and international organizations like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT), United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF). This external support gives a boost to the aims and objective of SAARC to

move forward for the better future in the social and economic fields and it is also a good opportunity for the members to develop inter-state cooperation within South Asia.

3.4. Social Cohesion among Member Countries/People to People Contacts

One of the most significant objectives of SAARC is to increase people to people contacts. Though in the presence of large scale institutional set up, it is quite difficult to create an environment for open social interaction but during the recent years, the member countries have realized the importance of this aspect of cooperation and as a result of this thinking, SAARC has tried to undertake a program of well-connected South Asia and that can be possible when people are closed together for which some initiatives have been taken like:

- SAARC chairs, Fellowship and Scholarship Schemes
- SAARC Youth Volunteer Programme
- SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme
- SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange Programme
- South Asian Festivals
- Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians
- SAARC Law (Association of legal communities of the member countries)
- Cooperation of Non-Governmental Organizations
- SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- SAARC Scheme for Promotion of Organized Tourism
- SAARC Documentation Centre

Moreover, the civil societies in the member countries of SAARC are also trying to create more communication networks between scholars, writers, journalists, academicians, retired civil and military officials. The success of Track II diplomacy between Pakistan and India is also one of the aspects influenced by this broad objective of regional development. According to Former Indian Prime Minister I. K. Gujral “I have the increasing feeling that un-official SAARC is going to be the driving force behind the official SAARC. This is some sort of ‘New Regionalism’ which is engulfing the entire South Asian region”.^{viii} SAARC has enormously developed people connectivity within South Asia.

3.5. Cooperation on Security and Terrorism

The SAARC Convention on suppression of Terrorism was signed in 1987 and later the Additional Protocol on Terrorism was signed taking into account the terrorist financing structure. This was in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1373. The Additional Protocol on Terrorism was adopted in 2005 after much debate and discussion on the definition of terrorism. In spite of these two important documents on terrorism, there has not been much enthusiasm to cooperate on issues of terrorist violence and funding between the member countries. Cooperation has been confined to bilateral initiatives.^{ix} SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD), Colombo, Sri Lanka
SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk (SDOMD), Colombo, Sri Lanka

3.6. Focus on Youth

It is a fact that in most of the developing countries, youth is ignored. Although youth forms an important part of development for any nation but still they are not consulted to while taking important policy decisions. Given the sensible bracket of age within which young people fall, they are highly risk taking and in case of no opportunities for progress, they even become the cause of governments fall. SAARC members have all an increasing rate of the young population and they must be made the center of attention which SAARC has considered upon.

The SAARC Youth Award is awarded to outstanding individuals from the SAARC region. The award is notable due to the recognition it gives to the Award winner in the SAARC region. The award is based on specific themes which apply to each year. The award recognizes and promotes the commitment and talent of the youth who give back to the world at large through various initiatives such as Inventions,^x Protection of the Environment and Disaster relief.

3.7. Poverty Eradication

As one of the poorest regions of the world, it is one of the most important priorities of SAARC to give attention to this main objective of poverty alleviation. The total population of SAARC eight members is over 1.6 billion and forty percent of this population is living below the poverty line. The illiteracy rate is about or even more than 50 percent. The task is not very easy but with conviction and vision for stable regional cooperation, this aim can be achieved.^{xi}

The seventeen SAARC Summit in 2011 accorded the highest priority to the alleviation of poverty in South Asia and decided to strengthen the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) which was established in 1991 consisting of eminent persons from member states to conduct an in-depth study of the diverse experiences of member states. The strategies for poverty alleviation were suggested as:

- Social mobilization,
- Access to education, safe drinking water
- Health services
- Nutrition
- Policy of agricultural development
- Labour-intensive industrialization
- Human resource development.

3.8. Financial Cooperation

The Meetings of the Finance Ministers of SAARC is an important feature of SAARC agenda. Till now, four Meetings of the Finance Ministers of SAARC have been held in Pakistan (July 11, 2006), India (September 15, 2007), Maldives (May 14, 2009) and Bhutan (August 24, 2010).

The First Meeting of SAARC Finance Ministers confirmed the establishment of an Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Financial matters including development of the roadmap for achieving the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a phased manner. The Member States are in the process of exchanging Concept Papers in the area of finance.

A SAARC Expert Group on Development of Capital Markets in South Asia was also held at the SAARC Secretariat on December 27, 2011 as recommended by the SAARC Finance Ministers. Sixth meeting of Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Financial issues took place at SAARC Secretariat on 23-24 April, 2013. The Seventh informal meeting of SAARC Finance Ministers took place in New Delhi on May 3, 2013 and Progress is being made in the positive direction regarding financial cooperation while considering and opening new doors for cooperation.

3.9. Integrated Programme of Action (IPA)

The IPA is an important programme of the SAARC process and includes 12 areas of cooperation, each being covered by a designated Technical Committee. The Secretary-General reports to the Standing Committee on the progress in the enforcement of IPA. The Standing Committee also reviews the institutional mechanisms and the functioning of the Technical Committees, their mandate and also evaluating the role of the Secretariat. The various committees working under IPA are as follows:

- Agriculture Technical committee
- Communications
- Education, Culture and Sports
- Environment
- Health, Population Activities and Child Welfare
- Meteorology
- Prevention of Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse
- Rural Development
- Science and Technology
- Tourism
- Transport
- Women in Development

IV. Constraining Factors /Hurdles in the Development of SAARC

There are some serious constraints which are, no doubt, not allowing South Asian cooperation to develop. Some of these hurdles can be described as:

4.1. Inter-state Disputes in South Asia

One of the major hurdles in the way of cooperation among the SAARC members is the mistrust, mutual security perceptions and hostility. All the members of this organization feel in one way or another threat to their political, economic and territorial stability from the neighboring countries.^{xii} They are still entrapped in the historical conflicts of colonial rule and the disputed environment after the departure of Colonial Masters i.e loss of property, lives, identities and communal violence.^{xiii} There are always high risks that any time the efforts for cooperation can suffer due to communal and terrorist threats.

4.2. Fear of Indian Domination

Another most important cause of SAARC failure is that there is a fear of India's hegemonic role in the region. Indian desire to participate in the decision making process of the region as a leader has caused concerns among the neighboring countries particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.^{xiv} The political, diplomatic and security concerns felt by the member countries of SAARC in South Asia has obstructed any positive development among the member countries.

4.3. Civilizations Clash

Professor Samuel Huntington has mentioned in his book "The Clash of Civilizations" that SAARC has been a failure because according to him the countries belonging to organizations like EU etc they belong to same culture but SAARC countries are those whose cultures are different.^{xv} India and Pakistan are enemies of each other, they fight on minor things, and then how can these two countries support each other in one organization. No country in the region is having any feeling of belongingness with the other state.

4.4. Unstable Financial Positions

The weak financial position of the member countries has also created an uncertain future for this organization. This weak financial position is reflected in the trade imbalances among the member countries. The SAARC members are financially and economically not very much developed. This thing is not conducive for the economic integration of South Asia. Most of the member countries export similar products and in that too,^{xvi} India plays a major role. This situation encourages the least developed countries to go for aid demands/arrangements and extra-regional trade which is not favorable for the regional economic interaction. The member countries of SAARC are not complementing each other but they are competing in fact. Mutual trade is very low. The lower level of intra-region trade in South Asia has made the objective of this organization a failure.

4.5. Asymmetry between India and Member Countries

There is economic, technological and demographic imbalance between India and other member countries of SAARC. India being larger in size, economy and possessing high technological infrastructure dominates other members. India accounts for more than three quarters of the regional GDP and technological infrastructure and two third of the global exports of the region. The smaller countries in South Asia feel uncomfortable about their trade relations with India because under the current tariff structure,^{xvii} India runs a large trade surplus with her neighbors. Also, India's volume of informal trade with most of its neighbors is quite enormous. All south Asian countries look up to India to share its huge markets due to its size and location, where 80% of the intra-regional trade in south Asia is to or from India. India blames the failure of SAFTA on Pakistan but it is not true at all because SAFTA requires Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka to bring their duties down to 20%. Moreover, India is attached to all the other member countries geographically as she is in the middle of the region and others are on the periphery. It can be said that without India, other member countries cannot move ahead as India links all the members together.

4.6. Lack of Trust among the Member Countries

There is also lack of trust among the member states of SAARC which does not auger well for future development of this regional organization. They still live in the cobweb of history and mutual rivalries and mistrust has caused them enormous damage already.^{xviii} The elites do not trust each other mainly because of their nationalistic feelings, vested interests and inter-state disputes. In the presence of such disputes, this regional organization cannot be hoped to be developed on stable footing.

4.7. Exclusion of Contentious Issues from SAARC Charter

The charter of SAARC itself has some self-imposed anomalies as its charter has the provision of not discussing the contentious and bilateral disputes. On the one hand, it asks for increased cooperation and exchanges and on the other hand, avoids negotiations on bilateral disputes. The charter also requires that all the decisions will be taken unanimously which becomes quite difficult. This clearly shows an unstable inter-state relationship towards equal participation in policy making for South Asian people. It can be said that the charter itself denies the true purpose of the organization. In such kind of conditions, it cannot be said to be developed on sound basis.

4.8. Different Political Systems

All the South Asian countries are having different kinds of political systems which is also the reason for the failure of SAARC. South Asia has not been a strong democratic region. Like in India there is democracy, in Pakistan there is transitional democracy, kingship in Nepal and presidential system in Sri Lanka. Most of the countries have remained unstable. The dispute between the two countries i.e. Pakistan and India over Kashmir

issue has never let these two countries to go well together and set aside their differences on the SAARC forum. Apart from this, India is having disputes with rest of the member countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and this thing has not helped SAARC objectives to be achieved.

4.9. Lack of People to People Contacts

The contact of the people with the Association is zero as well as with the people of the member countries. They donot know when was the Association made and what was the purpose behind it. In such a kind of scenario, how can they join together to help their own states solve their problems.

4.10. Lack of Strong Infrastructure

South Asian countries share some common features as well like cheap labor, low incomes, low value added commodities and comparative advantage in same commodities like tea and garments etc. The intra-regional trade cannot be successful in such conditions where the trade and economic structure and industrial infrastructure is similar. Almost all the member countries are not very strong economically and instead of intra-regional trade, they search for other markets globally.

4.11. Pathetic Condition of South Asia

About 300 million people of the South Asian region lack basic facilities and it is the most deprived region in terms that more than 340 million people lack safe drinking water. More than 840 million are without good sanitation and 400 million go hungry every day. SAARC is the most militarized place in world; its two countries Pakistan and India are spending 30 billion dollars on their defense expense. Afghanistan, its new member is facing war. In view of these all major problems, how such an Association can successfully work.

4.12. Some other Problems with SAARC

There are also some other constraints with the processes of SAARC which can be described as follows:

- The inability of the officials and leaders to envision the potential advantages of regional integration. In other words, we can say that the leaders have not yet made a serious and sincere cost-benefit analysis of the advantages of cooperation and damages of no cooperation.^{xix}
- Very strict rules followed at the official level and by the SAARC Secretariat.
- Red tapism, paper work and bureaucratic hassles at the secretariat due to which every task takes more than required time to be completed.
- Unnecessary formalities
- Lack of political will at the leadership level.
- The condition of unanimous decision making and consensus building for the issues which can be resolved bilaterally.
- Absence of collective vision for rejuvenating the region in the face of the globalization challenge.
- Border clashes and war like situation accentuated by infiltration and terrorism accusations.

V. Recommendations

South Asian region can be stabilized and cemented if policy initiatives both at the government and non-government levels are taken by South Asian leaders with commitment and mutual trust. Some of these initiatives and policy actions can be suggested as such:

5.1. In the Political Field

a) Role of India

India should play her role not as a big brother but as an equal partner for the stability and cooperation in South Asia. SAARC is not an unimportant forum rather its significance has increased in the face of changing global and regional patterns so India should be aware of this scenario. Most of the disputes in South Asia are Indo-centric so India should adopt a low profile to get the confidence of its smaller neighbours.^{xx}

b) Formation of Conflict Conciliation Groups

The CCGs can be formed for resolving the bilateral disputes when all parties to a particular dispute agree to seek SAARC help either to investigate the problem or conduct a fact finding study. The composition of the CCG can include a representative each from the parties seeking help of the group as well as one or more representatives from other member states to ensure impartiality. Such groups can take up studies of problems relating to exploitation of women and children and other issues on which countries from within the region agree to take steps for.

c) Discussions on International Issues

The SAARC Charter must provide for discussions on the international issues among the leaders of the member countries specially those relating to common issues of international peace and security, trade, environment and technology transfers etc. Currently, the existing structure does not allow for such discussions with the summit statements being made and written by bureaucrats well before the summit meeting. Such a move does not allow for these leaders to exchange on international matters which affect the region as a whole. Take the example of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations in Geneva. India and Pakistan, notwithstanding their own mistrust over nuclear matters had similar concerns about the proposed CTBT. Rather than working together, the two countries consciously fought shy of each other in Geneva, diluting collective strength that could have helped them.

d) Resolution of Bilateral Disputes

SAARC, being an emerging organization and having the potential to link the resourceful economies of South Asia, must include in its provisions to resolve the bilateral disputes peacefully and the provision of taking all the decisions unanimously without touching bilateral ones should be relaxed rather eradicated.^{xxi} Though it would not be very easy to initiate but it should be initiated because without this step, the overall development of this organization is meaningless. The principles of respect for territorial sovereignty, political independence and non-interference should not be avoided.

e) Role of Political Governments

In strengthening SAARC, the role of individual governments of all the eight member countries is very important. The lack of trust and sincere efforts has marred any development in this organization. When all the steps are taken with constructive thinking and a vision for regional integration then no doubt, SAARC can go much ahead of even European Union (EU).

Several wars in the region and a constant stream of allegations from most countries about illegal cross-border violations have seen hundreds of nationals being held in captivity. A SAARC fact finding team could be constituted, which could, in association with the International Red Cross, be able to visit jails and other detention centers to investigate claims.

5.2. Economic Initiatives

a) Monitoring of Policy Changes

In the face of speedy trade liberalization, there is a need for the monitoring of policy changes such as the introduction of tariffs, or price controls at the regional level for greater coordination and a more effective response to the challenges of globalization.

b) Establishment of South Asian Identity

Establishing an identity of South Asian region in terms of quality, brand names, standards, investment regimes, and other areas where a common approach would be the benefit of all the member states.

c) Cooperation at Smaller Sub-Regional Levels

Cooperation at smaller sub-regional levels such as West Bengal-Bangladesh, Bangladesh-India-Nepal to develop sub-regional growth conditions.^{xxii}

d) Interaction among the Citizens

There is a need for facilitating increased interaction among the citizens of South Asia by further improving road, rail and air travel facilities. There are, for example, no easy air links between the major cities of South Asia. One has to go to Bangkok to reach Colombo from Dhaka. Similarly, Pakistanis need to go to Dubai or Bangkok to reach Kathmandu. All of these practical obstacles diminish the chances of potential for people-to-people interaction in South Asia. An increase in joint-venture initiatives in the service and educational sectors is the need of the time. Today, Bangladeshi and Nepali students and patients flock to Indian educational and medical institutions. This, no doubt, helps to bridge the cultural gap. However, it is simultaneously contributing to trade imbalance in the service sector. Further, joint-venture initiatives in these sectors can be yet another form of people-to-people cooperation.

e) Role of India

India must play a more trustworthy and accommodating role to build up trust among the smaller neighbors e.g road transit between Nepal and Bangladesh should be allowed to flourish.

f) Trade and Investment

In order to strengthen the regional economic block, trade and investments activities should be increased among the South Asian neighbors.^{xxiii}

g) Economic Policy Coordination

Economic policy coordination is the need of the time to curb the rivalries in regional and international markets arising from South Asian nations and for similar trade profits and production. It is necessary to develop networks for integrated production and joint-export activities.

h) Learning from Successes and Failures

The South Asian countries should learn from each other's failures and successes in responding to poverty such as the micro-credit program in Bangladesh or decentralization in some states in India.

i) Establishment of Free Trade

Establishment of free trade areas by removing all trade tariff and non-tariffs barriers.

j) Free Flow of Physical and Financial Capital

Free flow of physical and financial capital and also facilitating and streamlining the movement of personnel in the region.

k) Targeted Development

Targeted development and uplifting of the production plus export of the weaker economies in South Asia.

5.3. Social Initiatives

a) Interaction between People Oriented Organizations

All types of people-oriented organizations i.e civic, political, professional and NGOs should participate to promote talks and exchanges,^{xxiv} and contribute towards building consensus within the region for a new order in South Asia, based on recognition of the people's priorities, sharing the common heritage and culture.

b) South Asian Identity

There is a need to build a South Asian identity based on common customs rooted in the cultural, historical, social, ethnic and civilization traditions. Civil society must be prioritized by the state.

c) Culture and Media

There should be greater exchanges of academics, poets and other cultural circles among the South Asian countries. Also, there should be easy access to each other's TV and other electronic programs. Organizing many more citizens press conferences, deliberations in public fora, seminars and workshops by academics and researchers highlighting the benefits of mutual cooperation and activation of Track 1 cooperation. Encouraging exchanges through video conferences and use of Internet, facilities to strengthen the trust-building initiatives that are already in operation, actions by the media (particularly the electronic media) to bring the people of South Asia closer.

Another measure with potential is to set up a SAARC Joint Commission composed of eminent historians from member countries to historically document the region, helping to remove the distortion of historical reality in South Asia.

5.4. Institutional Initiative

a) Structural Changes in the Secretariat

Structural changes are needed to make the secretariat more responsive to existing conditions as well as for quicker implementation of policies. Among these structural changes, the size of the Secretariat should be increased to deal with the wide range of issues being undertaken by SAARC under the IPA. In order to fund the increased activities of the SAARC Secretariat, all the member countries should pay, in addition to their existing contributions e.g one percent of their defence budgets as additional cess.

b) Organizing more Meetings

Another important structural change should be for the Secretariat to schedule into its calendar at least three summit meetings of Foreign Ministers and heads of the governments every year which would increase the level of interaction in different fields among the member countries. There should also be more frequent meetings of ministers holding other portfolios.

c) Greater Freedom to the Secretariat

There should be freedom to the secretariat to prepare position papers on multilateral issues of interest in the region itself. These could initially be limited to those issues on which countries concerned give the Secretariat the permission to undertake research activity.

d) SAARC Parliament

In order to achieve the objective of a well-integrated economic community, SAARC Parliament can be created. As an achievable aim, the formation of SAARC Assembly can be envisaged. This assembly, to begin with, may only have deliberative and not legislative functions.

e) Coordination with NGOs

The Secretariat of SAARC should involve itself with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for coordinating and increasing economic and infrastructural assistance. There would, no doubt, be great number of NGOs willing to associate themselves with the Secretariat.

VI. Prospects of SAARC

Though the formation of SAARC is a landmark step taken by the leaders of the region, the main rationale behind its establishment is to develop a conducive environment where all nations may interact peacefully with each other, cultivate sustainable peace and promote mutual economic well-being by utilizing available resources in the region through the peaceful process of economic cooperation. Nevertheless, after more than two decades of its establishment, neither South Asian nations have been able to push the process of integration into full swing nor the organization itself has become viable enough to promote harmony and economic integration for preventing conflicts in the region. Everything with SAARC is not gloomy. In fact, the establishment of this important organization is the proof that the regional neighbors want to achieve progress and, in fact, under the IPA, the member countries have been cooperating in various social, economic and security fields.

We can be optimistic about the future of SAARC because both India and Pakistan are now on the way to move ahead with peace initiatives. We can hope better that this regional organization has got enormous potential in the face of changing trends. The people of South Asia cannot be ignorant of the lost opportunities for their own prosperity and welfare. Indeed, they are well aware of the advantages of closer cooperation between the nations of South Asia. It is, therefore, time to re-invent the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizen activism, which will lead to a better environment for confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia and in turn lead to a better South Asia.

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