

SAARC and EU: At two ends of Regional Spectrum

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Abstract

Regional Organizations are formed in International Politics based on characteristics, condition and objectives. Regional Organizations are a kind of International Organizations as they have international membership and encompass geopolitical entities. They are well established as a part of International system. As a body they are based on formal instruments of agreements between the governments of nation states. They include three or more nation states as parties to that agreement because if there are two then it will be treated as bilateral relations between them although they may be strategic partnership or business partnership.

Now days, Different countries of the world are giving much more emphasis on the regional economy. Political problems are sort out either by the diplomatic means or they are kept aside to solve them on the proper time. They are trying to adopt the co-operative path instead of conflicts. Now it is believed that conflicts give rise to negative impacts on the economic development, trade is affected, and development slows down. Because of all these reasons The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC), Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and many other took roots.

The most important feature of Regional Organizations which is observed is that there is a link between politics and economics but does not privilege one over the other. Palmer and Perkins describes Regional arrangements or pact is a voluntary association of sovereign states within a certain area or having common interests in that area for a joint purpose which should not be of an offensive nature in relation to that area. The sovereign nation states join Regional organizations due to different reasons or motives. Such as-

- ▶ **Identity**- sometimes it gives nation more respectable or reliable position.
- ▶ **Accountability**- state increases its stretch of influence and support and may use this platform to make its offenders accountable.
- ▶ **Support** – regional organisation give support to its members which may be economic, political, moral or any kind this support deters other countries to do anything against it.
- ▶ **Internal external threats**- Member of regional organisation are bound better and closer because of common internal-external throats. Ex After 2nd WW the great threat was communism to western world. Hence North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) came up.

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- ▶ **Domestic politics** - domestic politics frequently becomes a significant variable. Ex International agreements and treaties may affect domestic politics may also change the balance of power between the branches of government.
- ▶ **Leadership**-regionalism being a tool of local governance also needs leadership from key individuals. Ex. European Union -France and Germany, ASEAN- Indonesia, SAARC- Bangladesh

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and European Union (EU) are well known Regional Organizations one is in Asian continent and the other is in European continent, both are Regional Organizations, but they differ in many ways although they both have some commonalities also.

Wave of Formation

SAARC, which is geopolitical union of South Asian nations was formed in second wave of Regionalism in modern era. In late 80's regionalism changes its nature and become more global and made its scope much wider as far as purposes were concerned.

On the contrary EU was formed in first wave of Regionalism in modern era. The old or the first wave of 1960's was restricted to Europe. It was protectionist in nature and the purpose was mainly few economic gains. International organizations were first created by European states to smooth their inter-state relations across a range of new activities resulting from industrial revolutions and technological breakthroughs.¹

Root cause behind formation

In 1985 in South Asia was established to enhance peace, co-operation and trade. At that time there were 7 countries India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka & the 8th member of SAARC is Afghanistan which was accessioned in 13th SAARC summit held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 13th November 2005. General Zia-Ur Rahman of Bangladesh gained de-facto power as head of the government already under martial law imposed by the Mushtaq government. He took over the presidency in 1977, for him it was essential to take such steps so that it reflects that his administration is legitimate. As president he founded Bangladesh Nationalist Party. He initiated and founded the first Asian regional group known as SAARC.²

The main motto behind the formation of SAARC is to gather all small neighbours to counterbalance India because on river water distribution issue the both Bangladesh and Nepal have same kind of perception. Some scholars believe that the initiation for SAARC is when America Allude to Bangladesh so that Military dictators of Pakistan and Bangladesh can get recognition in South Asian region.³

#The objectives and processes of regionalism initially in Western Europe and South Asia differ considerably

- # SAARC and the European Union are very different. SAARC as a whole still comprises developing countries with low incomes. The European Union consists of "old" industrial, developed countries, with high per capita incomes. These differences are significant in the identification of problems, of how policies are formulated, and what instruments are used for

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- implementing those policies.
- # The motivations for regional integration in Western Europe and South Asia are different. Economic and Political motives behind European integration was the result of -
- (a) The desire for a new identity; as an alternative for the discarded nationalist identities and ideologies which led to world war.
 - (b) The containment of Germany. European integration was thus a solution to Europe's perennial German problem.
 - (c) The wish for security against Communist expansion.
 - (d) Hopes of economic prosperity; the large common market was to allow economic recovery; and
 - (e) The expectation of a new shared power and as a step towards avoidance of double dependence on the two super powers and to achieve political independence. Economic and military integration in Western Europe was considerably facilitated by the external federator, viz. the United States, which was determined to build an economically strong and independent Western Europe so that it would not fall under communist influence. To that end, it gave extensive technical and financial support which provided considerable impetus to integration.
- None of these internal or external factors were prime movers of regional co-operation in south Asia. The divergence in security perceptions of SAARC member states handicapped and dampened regional integration. South Asian regionalism was "neither superpowers-sponsored nor born to deal with an external threat".⁴
- # An extremely important source of pressures impelling European states to cooperate with their neighbours are market forces and powerful economic interests, both public and private, which have stressed the need for a large and secure European market not only as an outlet for their production and services, but also as a base to enable them to compete effectively in their international markets. The driving force behind the Single Market was more economic than political, more the urging of the private sector and the business community than the initiative of the public. In South Asia, on the other hand, the process is from top-down with a minimal role for South Asian business interests to become the driving force for fostering regional integration.
- # Unlike the dispersal of strength and insistence on autonomy in Europe, South Asia is characterised by the over whelming predominance of India in terms of size, population, and resources and a number of smaller states with no common border between them. While India borders or is adjacent to five SAARC member states, its neighbours have borders with none. This basic asymmetry colours the perceptions of India's neighbours, who have sought to counterbalance Indian influence by seeking the involvement and support of external powers in the region. A prime motivating factor behind establishment of SAARC was the common fear for all small countries of domination by India and hopes that Indian ambitions

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- to regional hegemony could be contained within the framework of a regional grouping.⁵
- # The European Union has the existence of supranational laws and institutions, comparable to those existing in national systems. In the EU, directives apply directly to all member states and supersede national laws, Unlike the European Union where treaties are made and sought to be enforced through national legislation, enforcement in the SAARC is left to national governments.
 - # Despite a common civilization heritage shared history, and potentially integrative ecosystems, member states of SAARC have still been unable to meaningfully and effectively cooperate in fostering greater economic development in trade, industry, and investment. Which distinguishes South Asia from other successful examples of regional co-operation in the world is that as a region, there is a lack of economic complementarity such as that Western Europe.
 - # unlike the principle of consensus or majority voting as is increasingly followed in the European Union; SAARC follows two ground rules, partly to allay fears that India would dominate the regional organisation.
 - (a) No discussion of bilateral or contentious issues is permitted,
 - (b) All formal decisions, including the choice of issues to be discussed and the areas in which to co-operate, must be unanimous.

Thus, there are differences in the conditions and the institutional frameworks for the EU and SAARC one cannot apparently compare the incomparable since the former is perhaps the most successful experiment in human history and the latter, which is nearer the other end of the spectrum. In fact, the keyword in SAARC is regional co-operation whereas the key word of the EU is integration.⁶

Linkages between SAARC and EU

Contracts between the European Union and SAARC were initiated when some Members of the European Parliament visited the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu in 1988. "After that visit, we were under the illusion that things would progress. In my view, that visit was not conceived properly. The SAARC Secretariat had no authority and I do not know how the Members of the European Parliament thought in their wisdom that visiting the SAARC Secretariat was going to start a dialogue with SAARC"⁷ However, the visit by the European Parliament delegation was perhaps more of "an attempt to try to find out what SAARC was". The report written at that time by Hitsigrath of the External Economic Relations Committee, at about that time was "an attempt to make the European Parliament, as a whole aware that SAARC existed as to try to foster, at that stage, direct links between SAARC and the EC".⁸

In a "very fine resolution" on 26th October 1988, the European Parliament called upon the Commission to contact the SAARC institutions and the SAARC member states in order "to ascertain the areas of regional co-operation in which the help of the Community is desired". It envisaged

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"particular scope" in providing financial and technical assistance but emphasized the such aid shall not be given at the expense of existing bilateral financial co-operation. It expressed the hope that relations between the community and the SAARC would be intensified and calls upon the Commission to examine the possibility of concluding a co-operation agreement with the SAARC. It expected that the initiative in this respect should come from the SAARC and hoped that the SAARC member states would consider the question of entering into co-operation with the community based on an agreement at their next summit meeting.⁹

The European Commission invited SAARC Secretary – General K.K. Bhargava to visit Brussels. But Bhargava felt that this was an "Over reaction because I had, in any case, no mandate. We were not going to discuss any specific programmes of co-operation".¹⁰

Thus, he was unable to accept it since he did not have the mandate since the SAARC is constitutionally structured that he couldn't proceed further without having that kind of mandate.

The First attempt to reach out to other regional economic groupings was made at the Sixth SAARC Summit at Colombo in December 1991. The Colombo Declaration emphasized that "regional self-reliance" should be resolutely promoted through closer co-operation among countries of the association. The standing committee was requested to study the question of co-operation between SAARC and appropriate international and regional organization considering the evolution of SAARC activities in the core economic areas" and to report to the eleventh session of the Council of Ministers.¹¹

Political dialogue between EU and SAARC officially opened in September 1994 in New York between the Foreign Ministers of the EU-Troika and the Bangladesh Foreign Minister representing at that time the SAARC Chairmanship. European Commission and SAARC Secretariat sign Memorandum of Understanding on Co-operation which has provided the background for technical assistance on trade matters.¹²

Since 1998 SAARC has an informal Ministerial level dialogue with the European Union and ASEAN on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly. The first dialogue was held on 23rd September 1998 at New York on the side-lines of the 53rd session of the United Nations General Assembly. This was facilitated by the mandate given by the Tenth SAARC Summit at Colombo in 1998 to initiate dialogue with other regional organisations, viz. the European Union, the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), and the Organisation for American States (OAS).

The EU Troika led by Ms. Benita Ferrero Waldner, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Austria, emphasized that they were keen to enter into more concrete areas of activity in enhancing EU-SAARC co-operation. The movement towards SAFTA was an area of possible co-operation; given the EU's own experience. The area of banking and development of norms and standards World Trade Organization (WTO) related issues, transit and maritime issues and the area of environment, were also identified as providing considerable prospects for dialogue and cooperation.¹³

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In 1999 EU and SAARC agree to co-operate on improving market access for SAARC products into EU, working towards a cumulation of rules of origin for SAARC products for exports to the EU, giving a Technical support for the establishment of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement and supporting the harmonisation of SAARC standards.¹⁴

On its part, SAARC expressed the hope that the EU-SAARC dialogue would become a regular feature and the dialogue between the two regional organisations was hailed as a "historic meeting" which demonstrated SAARC's Political will to begin a serious dialogue" with other regional organisations"¹⁵

The lack of political cohesion among the SAARC members themselves, especially the uneasy relationship between India and Pakistan, makes the organization "unsuitable as a political dialogue partner".¹⁶

But later, in present time, EU is having observer status in SAARC, which is kind of privilege granted to give them an ability. To participate in the activities. Observers generally have a limited ability to participate in the Regional Organization lacking the ability to vote or propose resolutions. The EU has observer status since 2006. The EU values a lot for cooperation and integration in South Asia region EU believes that it can help in on-going integration process through its economic influence in the region, its own historical experience of economic and trade integration and of dealing with diversity, and its interest in crisis prevention. It is convinced that SAARC could play a useful role in regional co-operation and dialogue. Cooperation between the EU and SAARC seeks to promote the harmonisation of standards; facilitate trade; raise awareness about the benefits of regional cooperation; and promote business networking in the SAARC area.¹⁷

But the present scenario is that Europe Union is engaged, to emerge out of the current turmoil of the Refugee Crisis and Brexit and on the contrary SAARC is in intensive care unit (ICU) because of the Indo-Pak tensions.

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