

17th SAARC Summit in the Maldives: Time for action

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Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina leaves for the Maldives on 9th November to attend the 17th summit of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). On the sidelines, this will give opportunity for her to discuss bilateral issues with Dr. Manmohan Singh India's Prime Minister and other Prime Ministers of South Asian countries and President Karzai of Afghanistan.

The theme of the 17th Summit is "Building Bridges" is appropriate- both in terms of establishing physical connectivity within SAARC and political dialogue for building bridges for the benefit of common people.

Explaining the theme for the upcoming Summit, Maldivian President's Office representative and Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) Youth Arm President Shauna Aminath said "... The Maldives. So these are differences, but we want to use these as an opportunity to celebrate as a united force to build bridges of friendship, peace and security."

Birth of SAARC:

Bangladesh in late 70s conceived of a political regional institution consisting of South Asian countries similar to Association of South East Asia Nations of 1967 (ASEAN). However the concept received cold treatment both by India and Pakistan. At the pressure of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, both countries reluctantly agreed.

It took almost seven years to set up the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the 1985 Summit in Dhaka. It demonstrated that the institution had a painful birth amidst suspicion and mistrust between India and Pakistan.

The original member countries are Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan. After ten years, in 2005 Afghanistan was made a member of SAARC, although strictly speaking the country does not fall within South Asia. Due to insistence of India Afghanistan was able to be a member.

The founding principles of SAARC are self-help and regional solidarity. The importance of SAARC Summits lies in reinforcing personal relationship among the top leaders of SAARC and such meetings bring beneficial political environment. .

The Summits which are to be held every year provide an exchange of shared perceptions and values which are an important factor in the growth of good neighbourly relations and success of regional cooperation.

However because of political reasons, the summit could not be held every year. This year there should have been 26th Summit but this year 2011, the 17th summit is to be held

in the Maldives on November 10-11. That means nine summits were missed. For example, in 2005 Dhaka summit in February was postponed because India announced only four days ahead of the summit that it would not be able to attend.

Salient of characteristics of SAARC:

SAARC is specifically unique in that it is home to 100 different languages and ten different major religions. Its member the Maldives is the lowest lying nation in the world, at the same time, another fellow SAARC member, Nepal has the planet's highest points. The idea is to celebrate the differences that the region have and use these to unite nations to build a better region

SAARC accounts for 15% of the World's GDP. While there are billionaires in India, about 350 million people live below poverty line. Defence expenditures have soared in all countries while spending for the social protection of the poor and marginalized people is the lowest in the world.

It covers about 4% of the surface area of the world but has one fifth of the world's population. About 50% of the world's poor live in SAARC. Although there has been fast economic growth in the region, inequality among people has increased.

SAARC is asymmetrical in nature and India is dominant both geographically and in resources. Its central location provides its borders with almost all countries of SAARC. The region opens up to the India Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The militarization of Indian Ocean is a challenge to SAARC.

It is a tension-torn region and India and Pakistan fought three wars (1948, 1965 and 1971). The soldiers of both countries still face contested borders. Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers having missiles to destroy each other.

It is further complicated by the fact that India and Pakistan have different perceptions of security and as such they look to outside powers for their security. In recent times violence by terrorists/ extremists continues in almost all countries. Common policy of counter-terrorism has not been implemented. India and Pakistan have been circling each other on a number of issues-political and economic. Some say they are like un-reconciled Siamese twins.

SAARC is the least integrated region in the world with intra-regional trade at less than 5% per cent while within ASEAN it is 32%, 50% within European Union, and 68% in US-Canada-Mexico trade bloc (NAFTA).

Furthermore the leaders have not shed old mind-set from historical legacies, differences and disputes. The main reason for slow movement is because of mistrust and rivalry between India and Pakistan.

For all these reasons, SAARC has been limping for the last 26 years. The successive

summits had made several pledges which were never delivered to people. The regional forum has been a consultative body and has not taken any key collaborative project during these years. The 2006 SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Agreement) has not achieved its purpose because of long lists of trade items which are outside the Agreement.

At the Thimpu Summit in 2010, Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmy Y Thinley could not put it more bluntly than that when he told the summit: "Some 200 meetings take place every year amongst SAARC countries but these meetings are not matched by results."

How to make it effective?

- Cultural diplomacy is to win the hearts and minds of people of other countries and could be the initiator of forging unity and cohesion among SAARC nations. Bangladesh and India have observed the 150th anniversary of Tagore and the renowned poets, musicians, philosophers and writers of the other SAARC countries could also be the focus of celebration within SAARC countries.
- Bilateral political and contentious issues should not cloud the collaborative issues of regional cooperation within SAARC for reduction of poverty of people in the region
- The need for political will and firm commitment of governments is vital to the working of SAARC since the absence of political will and bureaucratic complexities are the main reasons behind the lack of effective cooperation within SAARC countries.
- Regional connectivity through multimodal transport can boost intra-trade, investment and reduce poverty in the region. The connectivity should be seen as service industry for benefit of the region. India and China have agreed long time ago to have physical connectivity through Sikkim for trade.
- The private sector, civil society and initiative of different think-tanks across the region should be involved in the SAARC meetings. Unless private sector participates, public sector alone cannot implement the promises made at summits.
- Energy, management of water resources, flood control, food security, effects of climate change, and tourism should be addressed through regional cooperation. SAARC has exploited only 12% of its hydroelectric potential and 88% of its potential remains unexplored (Bhutan has viable hydro-electricity of 23,000 MW and Nepal has capacity of 42,000 MW).

Some analysts say that despite territorial dispute between India and China, they boosted economic ties between them (bilateral trade will stand to \$60 billion per year within a period of few years). If they can do it, why can't India and Pakistan follow similar path for the benefit of people of the region?

The SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), a group of SAARC business leaders met in September in Nepal and proposed a 9-point proposal to boost physical connectivity for increased trade and investment within the SAARC. It is expected that for

the first time private sector may be included in making decisions of SAARC. Meanwhile on 2nd November, Pakistan has accorded the most-favoured nation treatment to India and this signals economic cooperation between the two countries that was absent during all these years. Pakistan's decision means that India cannot be discriminated in trade facility that has been given to other countries and has brightened the prospect of economic cooperation within SAARC.

It is suggested in the media that the Maldives Summit may declare the formation of "South Asian Economic Union" to coordinate and unify the trade and investment policies of SAARC.

What will make the 17th Summit different from other Summits is the political will and commitment to be demonstrated by all member-states in taking concerted projects in making the regional institution dynamic and action-oriented.

The SAARC, despite its difficulties, has come to stay because a regional political infrastructure for cooperation is necessary. It took 41 years from 1951 European Coal and Steel Community to evolve in 1992 European Union. Furthermore the region under the British rule was an integrated economic unit. It is hoped SAARC will evolve from its current inertia and climate of mistrust. If united, the region could be a powerful player as global power shifts to Asia during the 21st century.

It is noted that because of SAARC's geo-strategic importance, the US, China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, U.K., Australia, Myanmar and the European Union, have become observer states. Turkey wants to become an observer state to SAARC at the Maldives summit.