

Challenges for SAARC Leaders in the Summit in Bhutan

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

The SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), Summit will take place in the Bhutan's capital city, Thimpu on April 28- 29 and Bhutan has completed all preparations to host the sixteenth summit-level meeting, according to the Bhutanese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Dasho Bap Kesang.

Since global change is adversely affecting the region, 'Climate Change' is the theme that has been adopted for the Thimpu Summit. The theme is also appropriate for summit because Bhutan has maintained a pristine and eye-soothing forest in the country.

The first summit of SAARC was held in Dhaka in 1985 and it has a history of 25 years in the making. Originally it consisted of seven South Asian States—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In 2007 Afghanistan has become a member and SAARC now consisted of eight member-states. Myanmar is believed to have indicated its interest to become a member of SAARC.

The last (15th) summit took place in Sri Lanka in August 2008 under the theme of "Partnership of Our People".

Apart from the eight member-states, representatives of the nine observer countries including the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and the European Union, are expected to participate in the Thimpu summit.

The founding principles of SAARC are self-help, and regional solidarity and the Summits provide an exchange of shared perceptions and values which are important factors in the growth of good neighbourly relations and success for regional cooperation.

Although the summit of the leaders is expected to take place every year, 2010 Thimpu summit is the sixteenth. That means that all was not going well within the institution and nine summits could not be held due to political considerations among member-states.

Why SAARC is limping?

There are many reasons for SAARC not being active in regional cooperation and some of them deserve mention:

- Kashmir dispute is the most significant stumbling block in achieving cooperation between the two key member-states of SAARC--India and Pakistan. Pakistan does not want economic cooperation with India so long the dispute remains unresolved.
- India is so large in size that all other countries combined are smaller in size than that of India. This has led a perception that India wants to dominate others through SAARC.
- Terrorism is another factor which divides India and Pakistan. What is perceived as a terrorist by India is often considered as freedom fighter in Pakistan.
- A proxy war is going on in Afghanistan between India and Pakistan over its influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan is determined not to let Afghanistan fall under influence of India. This proxy war has fuelled mistrust and animosity between the two member-countries.
- India refuses to take initiative to address water, energy and environmental security of the region through SAARC.
- Trade among member-states is the important glue of a regional institution. Regrettably, trade within the SAARC member-states is only 5% while ASEAN trade among its members is 25% and European Union Trade is 50% among its members.

In 2005, India's former Foreign Secretary reportedly identified the reasons saying , "SAARC is still a largely

consultative body which has shied away from undertaking even a single collaborative project in 20 years of existence. In fact there is deep resistance to doing anything that could be collaborative.”

Suggested Action-Plan:

Against the background, the leaders in the Thimpu Summit may examine cooperation in the following areas:

1. To boost the inter-regional trade among member-states, Leaders may agree to remove tariff and non-tariff barriers.
2. Trade is also linked with interconnectivity with multi-modal transport with member-states. Leaders may provide guidelines for developing a comprehensive transport network and provide interconnectivity to a new dimension in the light of ESCAP and Asian Development Bank’s proposals.

That means any member-country can send goods to another country by road or rail transiting through and India’s cooperation is essential because India shares borders with all the countries except Maldives and Sri Lanka.

3. Integration of power grids is an important priority for energy. Nepal could generate about 80 thousand MW and Bhutan 30 thousand MW from hydro-power and a SAARC grid may be launched by joint collaboration with a view to removing the acute shortage of energy in the region.
4. At the Summit, the regional leaders find an excellent opportunity to discuss several other core issues including poverty reduction, water, energy and environmental security as well as agricultural sustainability.
5. A counter-terrorism regional cooperation plan may be devised in the light of Bangladesh Prime Minister’s 2009 proposal of South Asian Terrorism Task Force.

All the SAARC member states have recognised that regional cooperation and harmonisation of strategies are imperative in the globalised world for progress and prosperity of the region.

The threat from Maoists in India and the political problems in Nepal is rooted in poverty and deprivation of basic human needs. Once the region is prosperous the threat from such groups is likely to diminish because jobs, food and shelter are the main necessities which make ordinary people happy.

Pakistan has become again a democratic country by adopting the 18th amendment of its constitution on 19th April, rolling back dictatorial powers of the President. It is a new hope for Pakistani people for good governance.

Sri Lankan President has increasingly become authoritarian and appears not to tolerate any opposition in the country. The government has arrested the defeated Presidential candidate General Fonseka on charges many in Sri Lanka believe are unfounded.

The people of SAARC member-countries are proud of their democratic tradition and do not approve authoritarian regimes. The SAARC leaders may discreetly persuade Sri Lankan President to become more tolerant and accommodative towards opposition parties for the sake of preserving democratic traditions.

SAARC is a major piece of political architecture and it has come to stay, despite its current difficulties.

SAARC could play a role in the process of collective bargaining position for the member-states. The success of the regional institution is judged by interactions within the regional economic blocs to enhance its economic gains.

What is necessary is to get rid of old mind-set and a new vision for South Asian region must be in place. South Asia

is endowed with large human and natural resources but half of the world's poor live in the region (India alone has 400 million people at poverty level). This is not acceptable in the 21st century.

It is time that the SAARC leaders realise that that long and short-term regional measures are to be adopted without delay to bring down rising prices, water and power shortages for the benefit of people of South Asia. India is emerging as a global power and it is the obligation of India to bring on board all other countries of South Asia in a cooperative spirit towards progress and prosperity of the region.

The Thimpu Summit must open a new page of hope and action for the people of South Asia.