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WILL SAARC REINCARNATE?

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Unwillingness of seven members (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives) to participate in the 19th SAARC Summit, scheduled for November in Pakistan, for unavailability of 'conducive atmosphere' in post-Uri terror attack gives the impression that the South Asian regional grouping has reached a huge cliff, hard to retrieve.

Though postponement of SAARC summit is not unprecedented, the current episode indicates an emerging consensus that Pakistan is the stumbling block for regional peace and development. From 1992 till 2003, SAARC summits have been sporadic mainly because of Indo-Pak tensions including Kargil war, the coup in Pakistan, Indian Parliament attack, etc. The current postponement, however, stands out for the identical expression of concern by seven members. Nepal being the current chair has urged in a press release that "a conducive environment be created for the 19th SAARC Summit soon..." and members must "ensure that their respective territories are not used by terrorists for cross-border terrorism".

It is premature to assume that SAARC will march ahead minus Pakistan, but a reincarnation of the grouping is warranted as stressed recently by its incumbent chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Prime Minister of Nepal, for a review of its Charter and restructuring its mechanisms.

In the beginning, India was apprehensive of the regional grouping initiative, and mainly at its insistence, two provisions – (1) Decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of



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unanimity; and (2) Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations – were inserted in the charter to avoid any gang up against India. Interestingly, these provisions have been proved to be handicaps of the forum's capability to resolve regional problems. This has given SAARC a characteristic of a "shallow regionalism" which advocates economic integration while abstaining from political and security concerns of its members. Suffice it to say, a state will not trade unless it feels secured.

A Nonstarter

Except "strongly condemning all forms of terrorist violence", the SAARC forum has not been able to take any concrete measure or achieved any substantial headway in realizing the objectives of the convention. Recognizing the menace of terrorism and the urgency to curb it, the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed on 4th November 1987 (came into force on 22nd August 1988) by the members "to cooperate among themselves to prevent and eliminate terrorism from the region." A SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) was established in Colombo in 1995 with the objectives "to collate, analyze and disseminate information on terrorist offences, tactics, strategies, and methods." Last month, during the second meeting of the High-Level Group of Eminent Experts, measures to strengthen the SAARC Anti-Terrorism Mechanism have been discussed and all members have agreed for cooperation for capacity building on related subjects.

Furthermore, to strengthen the Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, an Additional Protocol was signed in January 2004 that came into force on 12th January 2006 especially to criminalize the provision, collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts.

Nothing substantial could be achieved in this respect as South Asia still, struggles to arrive at a working definition of terrorism for the fact that one member's terrorist is another member's freedom fighter. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's glorification of slain Hizbul commander Burhan Wani as a "young leader" in the UN General Assembly underlines the fact starkly. The fact that cross-border terrorism, a bilateral contentious issue, cannot be brought to the SAARC forum for adjudication. More importantly, as every member has veto power, disciplinary action against any is virtually impossible. Therefore, the forum has been a captive of its inbuilt mechanisms and principles which require an overhaul if it has to prove effective. Can SAARC be restructured to provide institutional space, beside the Summit process, for dialogue on contentious issues, specifically between conflicting parties? Will the member countries prefer such an arrangement?

Possible Reincarnation

Given its unique regional dynamics, there hardly any inferences that SAARC can draw from peer groups to reincarnate itself. Firstly, the security threats to South Asian countries



emanate mostly from within. Secondly, any bilateral conflict that involves a disputed territory, two different religions, and bitter history of animosity, it bound to perpetuate. There can be no easy solution as all these factors are psychological, require a psychiatric treatment. Be it Arab-Israel problem or India-Pakistan conflict. Either a miracle or a bloody war is the way out of this imbroglio, but neither is pragmatic.

Can Pakistan be debarred from SAARC? Technically it is impossible. Even if such a proposal is floated in the forum Pakistan will certainly not vouch for its own dismissal. Also, the euphoria of isolating Pakistan in the region must be taken with a pinch of salt. A few years ago both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were strategically proximate to Pakistan and China, overlooking India's concerns. Subsequent changes in political regimes largely sympathetic to India in both countries have brought the favorable equations in vogue. The current warm equation would change with the change in political regimes in the respective neighbors in due course. Therefore, in the long-run, carving out a unified South Asia by India, minus Pakistan and China is doubtful. Isolating Pakistan for long is unthinkable as well. In retrospect, China and the US did not isolate Pakistan even in 1971.

In the pursuit to resolving Indo-Pak tussle, adoption of a Sino-Indian model of cooperation to Indo-Pak context is off-emphasized. India and China have disengaged their differences over territorial claims from potential areas of cooperation, and in the process have developed stakes in each others' economic growth. On Tibet issue, both have adopted a pragmatic approach, not entangling it with everything else. Can this model be applied to Indo-Pak relations? The fact is, while India is keen to take along its neighbors in its economic growth, Pakistan is apprehensive for any integration, rather it entangles Kashmir issue as a precondition for any move.

To isolate Kashmir issue from Indo-Pak relations seems unimaginable. In an extreme situation, India may draw lessons from Sri Lanka's LTTE problem, though the context is different. India must capitalize on the favorable global order in vogue to expose, and eliminate the incentives for, those who adopt terrorism as a state policy. Both Pakistan and the Kashmiri separatist groups must also realize that post-9/11 world order offers no sympathy for armed secessionist movements and terrorism.

Broadening the Perimeter

With Pakistan taking hostage of the entire region, India has developed an 'end of the tunnel psyche' on SAARC and promoted sub-regional cooperation like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BOBCOM (Bay of Bengal Community), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) motor vehicle initiative. However, sub-regionalism is no substitute for regional grouping. If SAARC to survive, it has to reincarnate. It is now a challenging opportunity to ponder over every possible reincarnation of SAARC (SAARC 2.0?), probably broadening its perimeter giving it a Southern Asia nomenclature.



SAARC in its current form remains also a hostage of the psychological configuration of the region confined to its seven founding members. The terms South Asia believed to have narrowly coined in the late 1950s with the emergence of a US-led alliance that divided Asia into Southeast and West Asia. The name indicating a peripheral vision mainly emanated from the Washington-centred worldview that simply overshadowed the entity of the Indian subcontinent. It does not include all the integral members of the region like Iran, Myanmar, and Afghanistan until 2007.

It is high time that SAARC needs to break out from its current lopsided geographic nomenclature. There are important reasons and benefits in bringing other countries like Iran and Myanmar as full members of the grouping. First, Iran has sufficient stakes in the South Asian regional affairs as it shares about 800 kilometers of borders with both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has multiple linkages with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India since many centuries. Its formal induction into SAARC will help institutionalize the historical ties. Secondly, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India naturally form a trade and security 'complex'. Iran's formal inclusion in SAARC will foster better economic cooperation and energy trade under the banner of South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). The Chabahar port and the gas-pipeline project practically fits Iran into Southern Asian calculus for the betterment of the whole region.

Secondly, Myanmar is strategically located and integrally linked to the Indian sub-continent. It has traditionally acted as a buffer between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. More importantly, it has vast untapped energy and other natural resources which could be a viable source for South Asian energy needs. In the context of its isolation and China's influence in the recent past, it is imperative that Myanmar should be integrated to SAARC early.

Divisive Race

One may argue that inclusion of new members would make the already crippling SAARC immovable. While Bangladesh has a set of bilateral problems with Myanmar, Pakistan may not feel comfortable with Iran's entry. But with the expansion in SAARC membership, the opportunities and options for cooperation in a variety of areas would be manifold for all and may bring new enthusiasm to the grouping to help it reincarnate.

Reportedly Pakistan, in counter to India's move to isolate it, is exploring possibilities for a bigger SAARC economic alliance by aspiring to include China, Iran and neighboring Central Asian countries. Given its crucial geo-economic location, this would help Pakistan to integrate itself to other regions but if it continues to adopt terrorism as a state policy and "continues to be selective against terror groups", no one will come forward. Moreover, countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, far away from Pakistan's border, may not be attracted to Pakistan's initiative as they have their own ports.



On the other hand, looking beyond the SAARC for a productive regional engagement, India seems keen to visualize the Bay of Bengal littoral into a zone of regional cooperation devoid of Pakistani nuisance. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has recently expressed his enthusiasm for Bay of Bengal regionalism with an idea of a trans-regional economic integration involving the South and South East Asian nations, especially India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Japan.

Which way the South Asian regionalism will evolve in the years ahead is premature to conclude. Certainly, the death of SAARC will not be so sudden, and the birth of a new regional grouping will not be so quick. Much depend on the nature of Sino-Pak alliance and their equation with India. Currently, China is the only channel of support for Pakistan and Beijing would like to play the Pakistani card vis-à-vis India – in fact, an incentive for Pakistani export of terror. Unless China assumes some constructive responsibilities regarding its ally, South Asian imbroglio will return to square-one.

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