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## Time India and Pakistan together added value to SAARC

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By Col. R. Hariharan

In today's fast changing global and regional scenario, how can SAARC countries become more pragmatic and practical and really benefit this great chunk of humanity?

This is a question that has become a cliché. Ever since the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was conceived in 1985, it has been a work in progress. It remains largely ineffective, hostage to the political polemics of member-nations particularly India and Pakistan.

The leaders of South Asian states will once again be converging in Kathmandu on November 26 and 27 to attend the 18th SAARC Summit meeting. Of course, as the leaders are adept in public speaking, lofty ideas will be tossed around, with every one of them stressing the historic links of the region to peace, harmony and friendship.

However, at the end of it all the question when SAARC – world's largest grouping of nations – will make a difference in the quality of life of the people will be still left hanging in the air. That has been the norm. For once I wish I am proved wrong.

It is not for want of effort SAARC has failed to make progress. A look at the SAARC website shows 16 areas – a mélange of alphabets ranging from agriculture to tourism – identified for cooperation at the 17 summit meetings held so far. But the problem it faces in translating ideas into collective action.

For instance the SAARC Convention on Terrorism was evolved in 1987 – within two years of formation of the SAARC – even before the AI

Qaeda carried out the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S. Additional protocols to the Convention updated the strategies in 2005.

However, terrorism is firmly established in South Asia now than when the Convention on Terrorism was originally adopted. The sub-continent has become so fertile a ground for its growth that international terrorism in the form of Islamic State is attracted to roost here.

Similar is the progress made on the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) finalized in 1993, became operational in 1995. It was followed by the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) in 2006. However, narrow political considerations and suspicion about each other have prevented its benefits from reaching the ordinary people. Inevitably, FTAs between SAARC-member nations have been slow in coming and the consumer continues to pay the price for the inaction.

So SAARC protocols and conventions look largely good on paper. As a result SAARC continues to run in the same place with bureaucracy largely doing what they can think of. If only the decibels of leaders in summit meetings could add value, SAARC would have emerged vibrant. But this remains a distant dream and the development story in the region remains a lop-sided one benefitting the haves rather than the have-nots.

Usually any talk about gingering up SAARC starts and ends India and its fractured relationship with Pakistan for very good reasons. India dominates its South Asian neighbours with its enormous geographical size and overwhelming economic, political and military power. India occupies a major part of the historical memories of its neighbours. As a result India's soft power has become embedded in the region's religious, social and cultural perceptions with strong but varying internal response. India's success as a functional democracy since independence and rise as a major Asian economic power has scaled up the latent love-hate feelings about India among the neighbours.

India as the only nation having land and sea connectivity with all SAARC members gives it a strategic edge over its neighbours. Excluding Maldives and Sri Lanka which are island nations, others do not have land connectivity with each other. Cumulatively, all these factors give India an unmatched ability to influence and arbitrate issues in South Asia.

Predatory politics in the region has found it a useful tool to fan the fears of India overwhelming its neighbours. India-baiting invariably finds a place both in their political and security perceptions. This has resulted in anti-India sentiments usually featuring in political discourses during the elections.

In spite of this, most of India's neighbours have been pragmatic enough to maintain good relations and reciprocate India's gestures. Nepal and Bhutan enjoy the fruits of such good will to enjoy unrestricted trade and entry facilities for its citizens. Smaller states like Sri Lanka and Maldives had sought Indian military assistance in times of political and national emergencies.

Unfortunately, India had been slow to understand the need for taking greater care and sensitivity in wielding its power. However, India's

efforts to change its style since 90s has been buffeted by strategic priorities and internal political coalition compulsions affecting its delivery.

It is true the fractious India-Pakistan relations are a major roadblock to the growth of SAARC. The two nations together represent over five-sixth of the 1.8 billion people of the sub-continent. And with their collective economic and political clout, only these two nations have the potential to energise SAARC. But they are yet to exercise their cumulative power for this larger objective.

It would be facile to argue that the problems of SAARC relate only to the estranged relationship of India and Pakistan. South Asian countries have some inherent problems to start with. They have some of the high population densities in the world. The largest number of illiterate people and people below poverty level live in South Asia. Most of its members suffer from problems of internal unrest and extremism, lack of resources, poor infrastructure and governance. The life blood of many members has been sapped region in combating against some of the most powerful terrorist and insurgency groups in the world.

But the positives of the region should not be missed out while looking at the negatives. These include young and energetic population, strong entrepreneurship skills, rich mineral and marine resources, and assets of shared history and culture binding the people across the nations. And a huge under serviced market place and ready availability of large technical manpower that can absorb new technologies are assets waiting to be exploited.

The harsh truth is SAARC has failed because member-states have not learnt from the experience of other groupings like the ASEAN and the EU to adopt collective action to pool their strengths to overcome their weaknesses. Historical memories have been preventing to build their collective experience. This has resulted in the absence of a collective South Asian identity for fostering regional solidarity.

It is odious to compare ASEAN and EU with SAARC because each nation has its baggage of national experience conditioned by their geographical contiguity, religious and cultural beliefs and perceptions. The historical context and environment in which the EU and ASEAN groupings came about were unique.

Both the EU and ASEAN are products of Cold War compulsions. In the case of EU the post-World War-II economic privations and the threat of Soviet Union destabilizing their countries prodded them to come together. On the other hand, ASEAN came about with the U.S. patronage to act as buffers to ward off Communist China's threat to Southeast Asia. When Cold War ended, both the groupings focused on evolving structural frame works for issues of relevance to members like security, energy, developmental resources, trade and commerce, economic stability and counter-terrorism.

In the case of South Asia, there was no common external threat for collective action. The only common factor was the vestiges of British colonial occupation which conditioned not only the perceptions of former colonial countries but other independent ones like Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan. At present in all countries, democratic dispensation is in place with elected governments in power except Nepal where

the process is on for drafting a new constitution.

In Afghanistan where a new president has been elected and installed as Taliban terrorism has been brought to manageable levels. In Pakistan, despite the looming threat of terrorism and history of militarism, people have preferred to democratically elect the Nawaz Sharif coalition with a majority.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi who assumed office in May 2014 after his thumping victory in the parliamentary elections, ushers in an era of political stability. He is trying to change India's traditional laid back approach to its neighbours. His invitation to the leaders of neighbouring countries for his swearing-in sent a strong signal that building better relations with them will be his priority. With economic development on top of his national agenda, India would like to further trade and commerce links with the neighbours.

His invitation to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the occasion surprised everyone including his own supporters. And despite opposition at home, the Pakistani leader reciprocated the gesture and attended the anointing of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India.

At a New Delhi press meet on the occasion, Nawaz Sharif said "we both are in the beginning of a clear mandate from our respective nations. This provides an opportunity to fulfil the hopes of 1.5 billion people of the two countries who want us to focus on people and welfare. We had talks in warm and cordial atmosphere." The Pakistan Prime Minister was actually touching upon India-Pakistan rapprochement - one of the key triggers for making SAARC an effective entity.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has followed up his initial gestures to South Asian neighbours by visiting Bhutan and Nepal first, rather than visiting Japan or meeting with the Chinese President. When India achieved a land mark success in placing a satellite on Mars orbit in its very first attempt, Prime Minister Modi told the scientists of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to develop a SAARC satellite. "We should dedicate this satellite as India's gift....We should share the fruit of this with our neighbouring countries," he added underlining his preference for India's neighbours. These friendly gestures should not be missed out in reading India's new Prime Minister.

There are disturbing developments in and around South Asia that show time is running out for collective action. With the U.S. and its NATO allies poised to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan, the three groups of Taliban militants are likely to vigorously renew their operations against the elected government in Afghanistan. This could adversely affect the terrorism situation in Pakistan also.

According to Pakistan media reports the Pakistani Taliban has declared its allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). The IS which has gobbled up large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq has effectively used social media to appeal to Muslim youth the world over from the U.S. to Indonesia. This has enabled the IS to emerge as the most feared terrorist group with its widely publicised acts of brutality against Shia, Christian and Yazdi population.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which is locked in a war with Pakistan has expressed solidarity with the IS on the occasion of Eid al-Adha. Its spokesman Shahidullah Shahid said “Oh our brothers, we are proud of you in your victories. We are with you in your happiness and your sorrow....All in the Muslim world have great expectations of you....We are with you, we will provide you with Mujahideen and with every possible support.”

Last month, the al Qaeda Chief Ayman-al Zawahari had appointed a Taliban leader Asim Umar as the ‘emir’ of the new South Asia branch of the al Qaeda network signalling the renewed interest of al Qaeda in expanding its activities in South Asia.

Though the IS and the al Qaeda have not formed an alliance so far, al Qaeda may well follow the example of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an ally of the Taliban based in the tribal belt since 2001, has declared its allegiance to the IS. A significant aspect of IMU leader Usman Gazi message is his praise for the IS for its refusal to recognise state borders and being “free from the patriotic or nationalist agenda.” Due to the convergence of al Qaeda’s interests and goals, there is a distinct and dangerous possibility of it forming an alliance with IS in the near future.

South Asia holds the world’s highest Muslim population. This makes it highly vulnerable to IS threat. South Asia has to evolve collective strategies to combat the spread of IS terrorism and militancy in their midst.

Polio and Ebola are two other non-conventional threats of immediate relevance to South Asia that urgently need collective action. Thanks to religious fundamentalists’ objection polio vaccination there had been a huge setback in fighting polio in Pakistan. After 13 years Pakistan has recorded the highest number of 202 polio cases this year. This is not only a national emergency for Pakistan but for South Asia, particularly India, where polio has been eradicated with remarkable success after relentless campaigns.

One can keep on adding to the list of such non-conventional threats to nations including the Western penchant to slap WTO and intellectual property protocols against competitive pharmaceutical and manufactured products from South Asia.

But will India and Pakistan come together for collective action to tackle these common threats without the aid of the big powers? This still remains the ‘Big Question.’ Nothing much has happened on the thaw expected in India-Pakistan relations after the cordial May-meeting between the leaders of the two countries.

Even as the two nations contemplated resuming formal talks, two hardy perennials India-Pakistan wrangle - K-issue and terrorism – surfaced again to dissipate their enthusiasm. As a result tragic happenings have continued in Jammu and Kashmir, reeling from the recent devastating floods. Indian media has highlighted that on five people were killed even as they were celebrating the Eid holy festival by firing from across the border. Without entering into a slanging match who triggered it, it is evident the five deaths were as avoidable as the polio

attacks in Pakistan.

India-Pakistan polemics including the Kashmir issue are rooted in the seeds of Partition, which divided not only India but the society and people on the basis of religion. While the healing process has made some headway in India thanks to its enduring democracy, Pakistan's periodic military rule has stifled it from happening. As a result the two countries have fought four wars during the last six and a half decades of existence and its leftovers are holding up rapprochement between the two feuding neighbours. Unless the people rise up to change it, SAARC will continue to remain a paper tiger. Will Modi and Nawaz rise up to the occasion? This remains an open ended question.

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