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## India and SAARC: ‘Same Bed, Different Dreams’?

S. M. Ali REZA\*

### Abstract

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was inaugurated with an aim to boost South Asian regionalism guaranteeing wider development in almost all sectors. The “never-ending-rivalry” between Pakistan and India, mutual mistrust among actors involved and lack of statesmanship among the South Asian leaders, however, has jeopardized the entire mechanism of regional integration and cooperation. As the dominant stakeholder of the SAARC region, India was expected to take the lead in stimulating SAARC activities. But, in reality, a consensus regarding the role of India as the pivotal power within the grouping, and a consensus shared by the pivot itself could not be settled over the last three decades. Moreover, India claims that other South Asian nations led by Pakistan approaches to “ganging up” against India, forging a united front under the umbrella of SAARC. Although India has shown interest in SAARC on many occasions, its periodic reluctance towards the regional body is apparent in the guise of ‘living together, but acting differently’.

**Key words** : SAARC, India, regional pivot, mistrust, reluctance.

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\* Associate Professor, Political Science and Resource Person, Japan Study Center, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. E-mail: reza26bd@yahoo.com.

## 1. Introduction

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 as the first inter-governmental regional organization in South Asia with an aim to ensure peace and development in the South Asian region. Since its inception, the effectiveness of SAARC to promote economic integration in South Asia has been questioned and after three decades of its formation, the organization has done so little compared to the aspiration rested upon it. One of the biggest impediments to SAARC's progress has been the continued conflict between the nuclear arch rivals, India and Pakistan (Rana, 2014). The successful experiences of regionalism advocate that, as a regional organization, SAARC seems less-effective in strengthening South Asian regionalism compared to the other regional organizations of the world, such as the European Union (EU), or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although the organization was inaugurated with a motive to make the member states work together to guarantee the widespread and sustainable development in almost all the sectors, historically, the constant reality of power asymmetry among the member states of SAARC often has made the entire mechanism of the regional cooperation jeopardized. Until now South Asia is labeled as "the least integrated region in the world" (ADB, 2011). Among all the SAARC members, given that India is the largest one in terms of area, population, military and economics, the country appears as the primary regional force. Even after the inclusion of Afghanistan, India alone covers more than half of the entire landmass of South Asia. In terms of demography, the total number of population of all the other member states of SAARC does not even match with India's figure. The country also maintains the largest number of military forces as well as military expenditure compared to the other states of the region. Culturally, India also has much more diversity than the rest of the countries of SAARC (Cohen, 2001: 8). Besides, India's location at the centre of the region has contributed to be termed the region often as 'Indo-centric' region (Mukherjee & Malone, 2011: 93). Consequently, power unevenness between India and the rest SAARC members generates the environment of suspicion on the dominance of one over the others. Neighboring states have always been doubtful about Indian foreign policy postures within the region, whether it is a bilateral or a multilateral initiative (Gupta, 2012: 186).

India's hegemonic nature towards SAARC countries could be better exemplified by analyzing the 'Indira Doctrine'<sup>1)</sup>, which promotes India as uncontested regional hegemon recognized both from inside as well as from outside the region. It is often argued that, such hegemonic nature of India to her neighbors has been an outcome of the strategic outlook of the country's policymakers those are largely influenced by the

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1) 'Indira Doctrine' was formulated in 1983. According to the Indira Doctrine, South Asian states should firstly look within the subcontinent for help with their domestic political problems. Secondly, the presence of any extra-regional power in the subcontinent and/or the Indian Ocean Region would be considered adverse to India's security interests unless that power recognized India's predominance. Available at: <http://www.sangam.org/articles/view2/446.html> (Accessed on November 25, 2015).

Kautilyan<sup>2)</sup> tradition of strategic thinking which considers the next door neighboring countries as potential enemies (Ahmed, 1993: 216-223). The contrasting observations among the regional members, therefore, has formed an environment of mistrust which in turn has constructed the entire regional structure anarchic, and SAARC, as a multilateral organization has been repeatedly affected by the hegemonic postures of India. It is, although, true that the “never-ending-rivalry” between India and Pakistan substantially affects the success of SAARC, nevertheless, the efficiency and effectiveness of the regional body largely depends on the goodwill and commitment of India towards the regional body. After three decades of its establishment, although SAARC has addressed several sectors of cooperation among the regional actors, such as action against terrorism and narcotic drugs, trade, rural development, media, agriculture, environment, people-to-people-contact, poverty alleviation, education, nuclear non-proliferation, women empowerment, and above all, the institutional mechanisms of SAARC (Sarker, 2013), but the organization could not address the major political disputes among the member states<sup>3)</sup>, nor could it foster intra-regional trade among the member states up to a satisfactory level.<sup>4)</sup> In this regard, India, as the pivotal power of the region, could not maintain her proper responsibility, either because of her strategic outlook about her next door neighbors, or because of her lack of interest in the SAARC framework.

Against this background, the basic questions that this research intends to address are, (1) what was India's initial perception towards SAARC? (2) Is India still reluctant or frustrated with SAARC? (3) If so, what are the reasons? This article is divided into five sections: section one gives the introductory outline of the article; section two illustrates the historical background of SAARC; section three portrays India as the ‘regional pivot’ by demonstrating the asymmetric nature of the South Asian region; section four analyzes different trajectories of India-SAARC relations over the last three decades; and finally, concluding remarks are made in section five of this article.

## 2. Emergence of SAARC

Bangladesh's late President Ziaur Rahman first conceptualized the idea of South Asian regional cooperation during 1977-80. While proposing a summit level meeting, President Zia stressed the benefits of institutionalized regional cooperation that neither implied formation of a new bloc or alliance nor compromised any principle of nonalignment (Bokhari, 1985: 374). Bangladesh argued that, if the political

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2) Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) was an ancient Indian strategist. He was the Brahmin prime minister of the first Mauryan emperor of the fourth century B.C. and the author of *Arthashastra* (The Science of Material Gain). Available at: <http://ir.nmu.org.ua/bitstream/handle/123456789/5700/f2c8936431b9587a3448e1b3d8eff8e8.pdf> (Accessed on November 25, 2015).

3) A few of the dominant bilateral disputes are dispute between India and Pakistan on Kashmir, water-sharing dispute between Bangladesh and India or border dispute between Bangladesh and India.

4) As of 2011, the intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts only 5 percent of the total trade volume of the regional members, compared to the EU intra-trade figure of around 60 percent and ASEAN figures of around 25 percent.

leaders of the highest level could reach a decision to cooperate, then the bureaucrats would find a way out.<sup>5)</sup> Although all the six other countries welcomed President Rahman's proposal in principle, neither India nor Pakistan seemed to be enthusiastic to the proposal. India's concern was that the proposal was an attempt by its smaller neighbors "to gang up" against it. Nonetheless, India publicly endorsed the idea since it was not willing to be labeled as the one to have stifled the idea. Similarly, Pakistan's hesitations stemmed from its "India-phobia," a fear that this was not a Bangladeshi proposal, rather it was an Indian card made Bangladesh to play with an aim to provide India an opportunity to consolidate its dominance over the South Asian region or, if Pakistan did not join the forum, to isolate it in the region (Bokhari, 1985: 374).<sup>6)</sup> Thus, a low-profile beginning would serve the end of both countries. Now, once the proposal was accepted, Bangladesh prepared a Working Paper which included a forceful plea for promoting a climate of trust and confidence for greater political understanding, highlighted the uneven levels of development in the region, and stressed the advantages of a regional approach to international issues, identified eleven areas for cooperative activities, and gave some thought to the future possibility of an institutional framework for the South Asian region. It also accepted the "step by step" tactic culminating in a Summit, and sent it to other South Asian countries on November 25, 1980.<sup>7)</sup>

When the Dhaka Proposal was accepted in principle, the first foreign secretary level meeting took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka in April 1981 with an aim to consider the proposal for regional cooperation for the common good of the peoples of South Asia; thus, paving the way for an occasion of historic significance. Although there were some divisive opinions especially between India and Pakistan on the question of institutionalizing the cooperation scheme, it went forward formulating basic principles to guide further interaction within the South Asian regional framework. The joint communiqué also accepted the principle of "unanimity," thus giving "veto right" to all the states, and it was also agreed that "bilateral" and "contentious" issues would not be raised at SAARC meetings,<sup>8)</sup> and strikingly separated the political and economic issues (Bokhari, 1985: 375-76; Ahmed, 2013: 30-32; Saez, 2011: 12-14).

Some countries, however, were apprehensive about the Colombo meeting. For instance, India's foreign secretary, Ram D. Sathe, was reported to have suggested that India "approached the proposal for a summit rather cautiously opining that considerable side work would have to be done before this by identifying areas of cooperation" (*Hindustan Times*, April 20, 1981). Indian argument was that if we go for

5) Bangladesh's concern was that if we would intend to frame an organization without knowing the minds of the supreme political masters of the region, there would be many ways to sabotage the initiative

6) During his interview with this author, Ambassador QAMA Rahim opined that the truth was not on the either side. President Ziaur Rahman really wanted to have a forum to harvest the regional potentials collectively, to emphasis on our common points of strength (March 16, 2014, Dhaka, Bangladesh).

7) For a more detailed analysis of the "Bangladesh Working paper," please see, Mishra (1982), "Towards a Framework of South Asian Regional Cooperation: Colombo to Kathmandu," *Foreign Affairs Reports*, 31:12.

8) It is striking to note that the foreign ministers agreed only to discuss multilateral questions and issues suitable for cooperative solutions. They also endorsed the principle of unanimity to run SAARC. Many believe that such decisions were comprehensively the by-product of Indo-Pak rivalry.

a Summit without any background preparation and without preparing from the bottom, there would be high risk for the Summit to be proved unsuccessful. After the Colombo Meeting there were series of foreign secretary level meetings,<sup>9)</sup> and the first-ever ministerial level meeting was held in New Delhi, India in August 1-3, 1983 when the foreign ministers expressed their determination to give a concrete shape and provide a structural framework to this initiative with an aim to give the idea a substance beyond mere rhetoric. They approved an IPA (Integrated Program of Action),<sup>10)</sup> and decided to meet at least once a year, thus taking the birth of SAARC one step ahead of ASEAN. Following the 1983 foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi, leaders from the seven countries committed themselves to forming a regional institution, and the first SAARC Summit was held on December 7-8, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Having being conceptualized by President Zia of Bangladesh, the institutional leadership for this assembly was carried by Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the new president of Bangladesh. The delegates to the first SAARC summit formally adapted the SAARC Charter. As the governing document of the association, the bulk of SAARC Charter provides some guidance of the objectives, aims, and principles of the association. A remarkable feature of the SAARC Charter is that it explicitly encourages consensus and prohibit the discussion of contentious issues as mentioned earlier. Very curiously in a region where sharp disagreements on a wide number of issues are prevalent, the SAARC Charter delineates two very curious provisions in Article 10: "decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity" (SAARC Charter, 10-1), and "bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from deliberations" (SAARC Charter, 10-2).

### 3. India as the "Pivot" of South Asia

One of the important features of South Asia is that geographically most of the region is a contiguous landmass and a compact region in the world. Before Afghanistan joined SAARC in 2005, no country of the region shared a common border with the other except with India, the regional giant. Regional asymmetry is visible through various indicators in the region, such as population, size of the economy, area and military strength which poses serious challenge to regional integration and cooperation (Hossain, 2010: 131; Ahmed and Bhatnagar, 2008:6; Ahmed, 2013)). The asymmetric nature of the South Asian region was nicely pictured in the words of Bokhari when he articulates India as the dominant power in the region, Pakistan as a significant and reasonably cohesive middle power, Bangladesh as an emerging

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9) The second foreign secretary level meeting was held in Kathmandu, Nepal in November 2-4, 1981; third in the series took place in Islamabad, Pakistan in August 7-9, 1982, and the fourth in Dhaka in March 28-30, 1983.

10) The IPA initially focused on five agreed areas of cooperation: agriculture, rural development, meteorology, health and population activities. Later, it was expanded to transport, postal services, scientific and technological cooperation, sports, arts and culture. The first foreign ministerial summit, however, excluded trade and industrialization from the agreement.

middle power, Sri Lanka and Nepal as small powers, and Bhutan and the tiny Maldives as mini-states (1985). A very peculiarity of the South Asian region, as Bokhari observes, is that all other states in the region are contiguous to India or in close proximity to it; but none of them shares a border with any other South Asian nation, but with India (1985: 372). He rightly spells out that India has the power potential of all the other South Asian countries combined- a fact which neither India nor the other states can do much but accept (1985: 380).

Table 1: Overview of the Economy of SAARC Member States

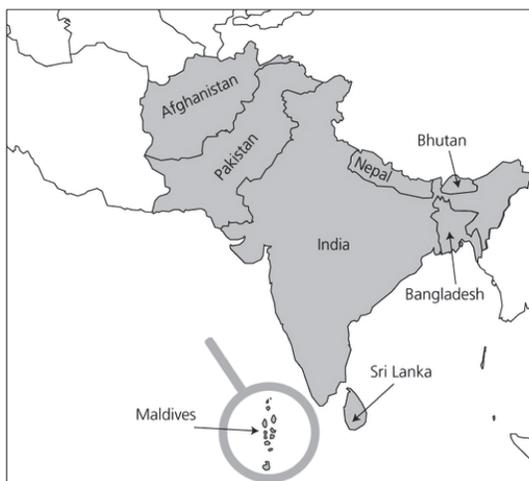
Country	Area (Sq. Km)	Population (millions), 2012	GDP (billions, US\$), 2012	GNI (billions, 2012 (Atlas Method)	GNI Per Capita, PPP in US\$, 2012
Afghanistan	647,500	29.82	20.50	30.37	1,930
Bangladesh	144,000	154.7	116.36	129.27	2,640
Bhutan	47,000	0.74	1.78	1.80	7,170
India	3,287,260	1236.69	1858.74	1913.17	5,080
Maldives	300	0.34	2.22	1.95	9,720
Nepal	147,180	27.47	18.96	19.16	2,190
Pakistan	796,100	179.16	225.14	225.08	4,670
Sri Lanka	65,610	20.33	59.42	59.34	8,840

Source: World Development Indicators, 2012. Available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>

As the data in Table 1 shows, the centrality of India is evident in the whole region, and it completely dominates the region due to its escalating economic strength, gigantic geography in comparison to other South Asian states. India accounts for 72% of the total land area, and 73% of the population in the region. India captures 77% of total Gross National Income (GNI) and roughly 81% of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of South Asia. Disparity of this scale is found nowhere else in the world (Hossain, 2010; Delinic, 2011; Ahmed, 2013). In her lecture at Harvard, Biswal (2014) labels India as the “economic engine” in the South Asian region referring to the recent economic developments of India.<sup>11)</sup>

We know that one of the important criteria for the formation of any regional or sub-regional grouping is a consensus regarding the role of the pivotal power within the grouping, a consensus shared by the pivotal power itself. This provides the basis for internal cohesiveness within the grouping and sets the limits beyond which neither the pivotal power nor its partners may stray in intra-regional and intra-group relations (Ayoob, 1985). Indonesia is the pivotal power in ASEAN in terms of size, demography and resources. The lack of consensus on Indonesia’s role in Southeast Asia had, in fact, prevented the success of attempts at regional cooperation during Sukarno regime (Ahmed, 2013). However, over the time a

11) In her address at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Nisha Desai Biswal, the US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs made this remarks on April 16, 2014. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2014/224914.htm>



Map 1: The centrality of India in the SAARC Region

consensus had evolved within ASEAN that while Indonesian primacy would not be challenged within the grouping, Indonesia itself would adopt a low profile so as not to exacerbate intra-ASEAN tensions (Ayoob, 1985: 444-455). From the very beginning Indonesian attitude towards ASEAN and that of India towards SAARC was quite different. For SAARC, initially India was reluctant towards the formation of any regional grouping in the South Asian region. Whereas in the case of ASEAN, Indonesian “goodwill” was focused, and it reassured the fellow ASEAN member states that it really wanted ASEAN to be materialized. Nonetheless, the differences in all respects between Indonesia and the rest of ASEAN countries were not as huge as it is the case between India and the rest of SAARC countries. In addition to that, over the time all the ASEAN countries especially Singapore and Malaysia have had tremendous economic development; thus slimming the difference between them. On the other hand, the economic development in the SAARC countries, except for India is comparatively slow, and there exists serious imbalance among the member states in all respects.

## 4. India and SAARC

### 4.1 India's Earlier Response towards SAARC

President Zia's proposal for setting up a regional organization in South Asia had quick takers in Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan who apparently shared a somewhat similar agenda for joining SAARC. For them, SAARC became a forum for projecting their individual identities by asserting their differences with India. However, India and Pakistan had initially expressed their reservations for a host of reasons (Dixit, 2003). Unlike the smaller South Asian countries, Pakistan was suspicious of expanding the

institutional scope of SAARC in including security issues because that would have strengthened the dominance of India, its arch rival. However, Pakistan was in agreement with other smaller countries in the region to resist any widening of regional economic disparities with reference to India versus the rest of South Asia (Ahmed, 2013: 34-35). In reality, Pakistan appeared cautious about the Bangladeshi proposal fearing that any regional forum would consolidate and legitimize India's economic and political dominance in South Asia. Pakistan feared that it could lose its political stance and national identity vis-à-vis India if it joined this regional cooperation arrangement without satisfactorily resolving its bilateral disputes with India. It also feared that deeper involvement with the SAARC Forum would weaken the drive and credibility of its policy toward the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, which it wants to preserve and consolidate by all means (Muni, 1985: 396-97).

Prior to the formation of SAARC, President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan made the point clear that participating in a South Asian forum would not affect his country's relations with the Muslim world (Murthy, 2009 as cited in Ahmed, 2013: 35). Interestingly, expectation of the smaller states regarding the role of India in SAARC was well-resonated indirectly by President Zia-ul-Haq during his meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in New Delhi where Zia had gone to attend the Non-Aligned Summit: I reminded Mrs. Gandhi of the success of ASEAN and asked her if I could tell her a story. (I said that) when I met President Suharto of Indonesia some time back, I asked him to give me one solid reason for ASEAN progress. He told me, "Indonesia, being the largest partner, has deliberately played a very docile role. That is why ASEAN has been a success." I added, "Mrs. Gandhi, I leave the rest unsaid."<sup>12)</sup>

India was concerned about the proposal's reference to security issues and was also struck by an apprehension that the smaller neighbours would use the proposed organization to "gang up" against her by forging a united front. New Delhi, however, was caught up in the dilemma that if it did not join that forum, it would be accused of being self-centered and a deterrent to genuine effort to create institutions for stability and development of the region, despite being the well-endowed country in the region with the greatest potentiality to contribute to such an effort. If India joined the group, it faced the possibility of its neighbours ganging up against it and using the SAARC institutions to generate pressure on various issues about which they had differences of opinion with India. In other words, India could be under pressure through this collective regional instrumentality. After much introspection and extensive consultations, Mrs. Gandhi took the decision to join the negotiations for creating SAARC. She felt that despite the risks of facing potential collective pressure from its neighbours, India could not keep itself out of a regional grouping, the declared aim of which was to create political and institutional mechanisms for generating cooperation aimed at the collective benefit of the peoples of the South Asian region. India, therefore,

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12) Davies, Derek and Kerns, Hikaru (1983). "Zia's Silver Lining," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 4, 1983.

joined the consultative process for the creation of SAARC (Dixit, 2003: 149-150).

On the other hand, there was no such consensus regarding the role of India as the pivotal power of South Asia either in terms of acceptance of its predominance or the circumscription of its power or its voluntary decision to adopt a low political profile during the formation of SAARC. Neither India was willing to adopt a low profile, nor was it feasible for the other South Asian countries to circumscribe its power. Ayooob argued that "the divergence in the perception of SAARC members regarding the role of the pivotal regional power further detracts from the possibilities of meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia" (1985: 456). India feared that the outcome of the Summit would be embarrassing to its own position because in the long run this would be used by its smaller neighbours to put collective pressure on India on bilateral issues affecting its vital national interests. Nonetheless, India could not reject the proposal because the idea of regional cooperation itself was a positive one and could play a useful role in India's own regional policy. An outright rejection of the proposal by India could also give legitimacy to the neighboring countries going ahead with it on their own without India, thus paving the way for her neighbors "ganging up" against India aggravating her isolation in the region (Muni, 1985: 395-96). India, therefore, had been careful in its response to the proposal, activated its diplomacy to prove the proposal moderated and redefined so as to become compatible with essential aspects of its perceived interests in the region.

Many experts believe that the apprehension of the neighbors 'ganging up' against it, and the neighbors' fear of a closer engagement with India resulting in the latter's domination had kept India's enthusiasm in SAARC at low profile (Muni, 1985; Ayooob, 1985). In India's assessment, since the economic potential of the region did not appear to be very attractive, SAARC could not offer economic opportunities it had been looking for (Muni and Jetly, 2010: 25). As a matter of fact, being frustrated by the bilateral rivalries with Pakistan and, to some extent, with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India in the late nineties had even started drifting away from SAARC. The creation of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was one such manifestation of India's drift. It persuaded even Nepal and Bhutan subsequently to join BIMSTEC, making almost a parallel organization to SAARC without Pakistan. This drift in India's approach to SAARC seems to have been changed with the beginning of the twenty first century, as India began to realize that its credibility and acceptance as a rising Asian Power would remain under cloud if it fails to carry its immediate neighbors along. India began to reassess SAARC as a political and strategic necessity, if not so much an economic promise. C. Raja Mohan rightly commented that India's own rapid economic development is "no guarantor of stability in South Asia. Without all boats rising in South Asia at the same time, India can neither prosper nor be secure" (2006: 350).

## 4.2 India's Renewed Interest in SAARC

The change in India's stance towards SAARC emanates from its growing economic self-confidence and political resilience. In fact, throughout the 1990s, India gradually came out of its protectionist mind set with growth and liberalization projecting itself as an economic opportunity to its neighbors. This spirit was echoed in the voice of then Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran (2005) when he said, "India is today one of the most dynamic and fastest growing economies of the world. It constitutes not only a vast and growing market, but also a competitive source of technologies and knowledge-based services. Countries across the globe are beginning to see India as an indispensable economic partner and seeking mutually rewarding economic and commercial links with our emerging economy. Should not our neighbors also seek to share in the prospects for mutual prosperity India offers to them?"<sup>13)</sup>

His successor Shiv Shankar Menon underlined the value of 'connectivity'- physical, cultural and economic in the region. He made a similar plea for a change in India's own mindset towards its neighbors by declaring that "We will continue our efforts to develop close political and economic relations with all our neighbors. Our goal is a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighborhood. India will continue to remain a factor for stability and peace in the region. Our economic growth is having an impact in the region and there are increased opportunities for our neighbors to benefit by partnering India. We will continue to make unilateral gestures and extend economic concessions. The political challenge will be set aside past mistrust and suspicions which have restricted the expression of our natural affinities, based on shared geography, history and culture."<sup>14)</sup>

In line with this policy, India moved to create connectivity as much as possible on its own and also by persuading the neighbors to join in. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had even gone to the extent of proposing that the borders, since they cannot be eliminated, be made irrelevant, not just with Pakistan but in the whole South Asian region. In his speech at the thirteenth SAARC Summit in Dhaka in November 2005, Prime Minister Singh expected that "all South Asian countries would provide to each other, reciprocally, transit facilities to third countries, not only connecting one another, but also connecting to the larger Asian neighborhood, in the Gulf, Central Asia and the South-East Asia. India, which borders each of the members of the South Asia, is willing to do so."<sup>15)</sup> By declaring India's unswerving commitment to the realization of the solemn goals of SAARC, Singh pledged that the "challenges we face as a region and as members of the larger international community are no longer

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13) Then Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran's speech on 'India and its Neighbors' at the India International Center, February 14, 2005. Available at: <http://www.indianembassy.org/Speeches/1.htm>.

14) Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon at the first IISS-Citi India Global Forum in New Delhi, April 19, 2008. Available at: <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/adelfphi/by%20year/2008-e03b/perspectives-on-international-security--speeches-and-papers-from-the-50th-anniversary-year-of-the-i-3238/ap400-18-menon-b463>

15) Prime Minister Singh at the Thirteenth Summit meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 12 - 13 November 2005. Available at: <http://pmindia.gov.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=215>

susceptible to purely national solutions. There is an imperative need to change and overcome the divisions of history and politics to forge a new architecture of mutually beneficial economic partnership. India, for its part, remains ready for this endeavor".<sup>16)</sup>

India's growing emphasis on South Asia as a region is clearly portrayed in the much-talked report *Nonalignment 2.0* in which the authors identify South Asia as the more vital region for India.<sup>17)</sup> In their words, "Within the Asian theatre no region is more vital for India than South Asia. India cannot hope to arrive as a great power if it is unable to manage relationships within South Asia" (Khilnani et al., 2012: 15). South Asia holds India back at many levels. Similarly, India-factor is very important in the domestic politics of most of its neighbors. Therefore, India has to expend enormous resources to manage its conflict-ridden neighborhood. In doing so, India's top strategic priority should be to deepen economic engagement in South Asia. As the major power in the SAARC region, India will have to go the extra miles to reassure its neighbors, especially the smaller ones', and be prepared for many more unilateral concessions on trade, investment and aid. More importantly, because South Asia is a region where other great powers, particularly China, are trying to expand their influence; India should have a credible engagement plan of its own to counter Chinese economic engagement in the region (Khilnani et al., 2012: 15-17).

### 4.3 Expert-Views on India's Role in SAARC

Commentators have diverse opinion on India's role in SAARC. Pandey argues that India's reluctance towards SAARC is understood when it is seen that SAARC is not even mentioned in India's grand strategy or foreign policy vision documents, policy statements of ministers, and election manifestos (2011: 515). One Japanese diplomat who worked in South Asia for a long time and had the opportunity to observe SAARC very closely opined on condition of anonymity that in the past India always wanted to have some sort of troubles in its neighboring countries. The reason was that if there were some sort of instability in the neighboring countries, this would give good reason for India to intervene. This Indian attitude began to change with the beginning of the twenty first century. India wanted to strengthen its own economy. Therefore, a stable neighborhood was considered as leverage in pursuance of such a goal. During 1999-2000 Indian economy started growing rapidly, and India started to consider its neighboring countries as potential markets of its own products. Therefore, the stability, or peaceful environment of the region was a prerequisite for this target. The second reason is more specific: spread of terrorism in the South Asia region. Especially the 2008 Mumbai attack (November 26, 2008) by Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba shocked India much, and henceforth India seriously wanted to have a peaceful

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16) Ibid.

17) Very curiously, the word "SAARC" is not mentioned anywhere in the entire report.

environment in its neighborhood to harvest the untapped potential that prevails in the entire region.<sup>18)</sup>

Professor Takako Hirose, a leading Japanese scholar on South Asia, argued rather bluntly on India's role in SAARC and doubts whether India puts any real importance on SAARC, finds it beneficial for itself to develop SAARC, or strengthening relationship under the framework of SAARC. She argues that historically India maintains a cool relationship with its neighbors particularly with Pakistan ever since the independence.<sup>19)</sup> Moreover, the asymmetry between India and rest of South Asia is strongly realized having such huge imbalances what can India achieve from SAARC? She questions.<sup>20)</sup> While commenting on India's role in SAARC, former SAARC Secretary General Ambassador Rahim observed that India's role in SAARC is very vital and obvious because India is not only the largest country in the region, both physically and economically it has brought certain peculiar advantages in its relations with other SAARC countries. He admits that initially India had some suspicious notions about the regional body which had been getting slimmed over the time.<sup>21)</sup>

Almost the same views were resonated in the words of His Excellency Masud Bin Momen, Bangladesh's Ambassador to Japan. In his words, "India's role in SAARC has always been very important. We have seen that when India takes interest in pushing particular issues, then we get the results much faster; because the question of funding is there, and India is the highest contributor to SAARC. Therefore, if any project gets the blessings of the highest contributor, it is supposed to run very smoothly."<sup>22)</sup> In this regard, he refers to the recently founded South Asian University and suggested that because of India's initiative it has been in operation within a very short period of time. Ambassador Momen argues that there is a positive correlation between the achievements of SAARC and India's role: where achievement was maximum, India's stake was high. Over the years we have observed that Indian "goodwill" is very important for the success of SAARC.<sup>23)</sup> Nonetheless, there is no denying the fact that intra-regional trade, one of the main targets of SAARC, could not be given a boost for India's protectionist policy to open its market under the SAPTA and SAFTA agreements. Some observers note that as an emerging economy of Asia, India wants to build its economic relations beyond South Asia.<sup>24)</sup>

It is obvious that India will have some sort of dominance in the regional grouping because of the former's global recognition, the centrality of its location, huge economy, military capability and its monetary

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18) Interview with the anonymous diplomat in May and July, 2014. Tokyo:Japan.

19) Personal Interview with this author in May, 2014 (Tokyo, Japan).

20) Ibid.

21) Ambassador Rahim, op. cit..

22) Author's personal interview with Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Bangladesh's Ambassador to Japan on June 26, 2014 (Bangladesh Embassy, Tokyo: Japan).

23) Ibid.

24) Personal interview with Professor Akmal Hossain, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka on March 18, 2014 (Dhaka: Bangladesh).

contribution to SAARC.<sup>25)</sup> Other member states also should realize the “pivot factor” in the SAARC region. An anonymous director of the SAARC secretariat portrays India as the ‘Himalayas’ in the context of SAARC, and spells out that SAARC without India would be absurd. He nicely argues that smaller member states of SAARC should not try to push it; rather they should try to make tunnels through the mountain to find their way out.<sup>26)</sup> Similarly, as the pivotal power, India should have played the role which is expected of it.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Most successful illustrations of regional integration and cooperation have been motivated by the need to protect against some external security threat which may be regarding territorial, ideological or political dominance, as Ayoob (1985) argues. In the case of Southeast Asia, increased power and influence of Communist China and other communist regimes caused the Southeast Asian nations to come together to form ASEAN in 1967. In absence of such a significant external threat, nations in South Asia often find some reason to limit their efforts towards increasing integration. Rather some of the countries in the region, as we have seen, feel threatened within the region by the regional giant, India. Similarly, India’s reservation towards SAARC is evident throughout the entire history of the regional body since 1985. India’s “never-ending-rivalry” with Pakistan on Kashmir issue, fear of the smaller neighbours “ganging up” against her made India to forward cautiously with SAARC. India’s earlier reluctance towards the formation of SAARC was apparent in her hesitation to organize a Summit meeting and to have a secretariat of the organization. As mentioned previously, at the first foreign secretary level meeting in 1983 one of the conditions of India was that SAARC should have no secretariat. Nonetheless, at the inaugural session of the first Summit in December 7, 1985 Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made it clear that India was desirous to forge a close cooperation with South Asian states in various fields of common interest-culture, trade, science and information technology so that the region might move forward in the direction of self-reliance in key areas of economic development.

Indian policy makers has always adopted a low-profile in the SAARC so that wrong signals, in their opinion, do not widen to other member countries that it desires to dominate the region as a hegemon. As a matter of fact, over the last three decades, India has treaded cautiously on the path of ushering in regional cooperation in South Asia given the sensitivities of small neighbours, notably Pakistan. In fact, it is caught up in a dilemma. If it moves fast in taking initiatives to step up the regional cooperation, other member countries harbor suspicion of its hegemonic designs. On the other hand, if India moves slowly, it

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25) India alone contributes more than 30% of the total expenditure of SAARC activity.

26) Personal interview with an anonymous director of the SAARC Secretariat on March 5, 2014 (Kathmandu, Nepal).

is charged with being indifferent to SAARC (Dixit, 2003). However, at one point in the late nineties India had even started drifting away from SAARC being frustrated by the bilateral rivalries with Pakistan and its fellow neighbors. It is widely believed that the creation of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and stimulating the “Look East” policy were two such manifestations of India’s drift. This drift in India’s approach towards SAARC had been changed somewhat with the beginning of the twenty first century reassessing SAARC as a politico-strategic necessity, if not so much an economic promise. This might have encouraged India to emphasis on ‘comprehensive regional connectivity’- physical, economic and cultural- throughout the entire Manmohan regime. Critics, however, attack this endeavor as the “Indianization of SAARC” (Shesheng, 2010).

Incumbent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vision of “*Sabkasaath, sabkavikas*” or “cooperation of all, development for all” might have originated from the same vein which generates new hopes, at least rhetorically, among the countries of South Asia. His historic initiative to invite the leaders of SAARC countries to attend his swearing in ceremony was considered widely as a ‘good start’. Modi’s first day in office in May 2014 was dedicated exclusively to bilateral meetings with leaders of the SAARC countries. After taking office, Modi made his first state visit to Bhutan and then to Nepal where he repeatedly stressed the need for increased regional cooperation. In fact, Modi’s “neighbours first” policy has drawn widespread appreciation in the SAARC region and beyond. In his epoch-making Independence Day Speech on August 15, 2014 Mr. Modi further expressed his commitments to cooperate with the neighbors. He particularly emphasized on poverty alleviation under the framework of SAARC. In his words, “I seek cooperation from neighboring countries for fighting against poverty in concert and cooperate with them, so that together with SAARC countries we can create our importance and emerge as a power in the world. It is imperative that we work together with a dream to win a fight against poverty, shoulder to shoulder.”<sup>27)</sup> Having such vigor in mind, Modi attended his debut SAARC Summit (the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit) in Kathmandu in November 2014 and encouraged his neighbours to join “India’s economic opportunities and growth” with an aim to foster “deeper regional integration.” This time again, Pakistan’s reluctance on the connectivity agreements and almost all of India’s neighbours push for China’s greater role in South Asia vis-à-vis SAARC disappoints India.<sup>28)</sup> A frustrated Modi remarked in Kathmandu that regional integration in South Asia would go ahead “through SAARC or outside it, among all of us or some of us.” He insisted on bilateralism and sub-regionalism outside the SAARC framework. Being hostage to factors such as conflicting inter-state relations, huge trust-deficit among key actors and the lack

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27) See, Narendra Modi’s Independence Day Speech, Full Text. Available at: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/narendra-modi-independence-day-speech-full-text-red-fort/1/377299.html> (Accessed on August 18, 2014).

28) Most of the South Asian countries support China’s claim of elevating its status from that of an observer, to either a full member or a dialogue partner both for the lure of greater economic resources, as well as strategic potential of keeping India in “balance” (Muni, 2014).

of requisite political will among leaders of South Asian countries, the last three decades of SAARC has got mired in confusion and uncertainty. This might have compelled India to 'dream differently,' although 'it shares the same bed with SAARC'.

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