Could Expansion of SAARC Strengthen Regional Cooperation in South Asia?

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Abstract

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) underwent its first expansion procedure by including Afghanistan as its eighth formal member and welcoming nine observers from outside the region since 2005. There are some scholarly debates on the expansion of SAARC. Some argue that enlargement would add new strength and dynamism to SAARC fostering regional cooperation, while others maintain that the expansion might bring more challenges rather than cooperation due to anomalous and asymmetric relations among the members and observer states. This paper argues that the inclusion of Afghanistan and other powers in SAARC is unlikely to bring innovation and dynamism unless the regional body develops strong and clear institutional mechanisms to engage and interact meaningfully for sub-regional as well as inter-regional cooperation. This article also makes an assessment of Japan's involvement in the SAARC process as an observer for cooperation and development of the region.

Keywords：SAARC, expansion, Afghanistan, Observers, Japan.

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1. Introduction:

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)[1] has completed about three decades of formal existence since its inauguration in 1985, and has been serving as an important forum for institutional links among South Asian countries. It can claim considerable success in conceptual evolution of theoretical ground work by producing a number of creative ideas in identifying South Asia's emerging challenges and also finding out ways to address them through cooperative regionalism (Lawrence, 2011: 1). Muni and Jetly said that SAARC has "succeeded in stirring up regional consciousness of cooperation and collective action on various economic and social fronts across the borders in South Asia" (2010: 1). It has made significant strides to strengthen economic cooperation and maximize the region's vast potential for trade and investment among its members. Although SAARC has generated a seemingly endless supply of initiatives, summit declarations, communiqués and expert committee reports; its record however is still very unimpressive when it comes to translating the creative ideas into concrete policy decision and implementation. Experience shows that the progress of the organization has largely been conditioned by political atmospheres in the region (Shah, 2004: 344), and efforts at fostering regional cooperation are continually beaten under the pressure of internal bilateral rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan. In reality SAARC has not been perceived as a dynamic and effective regional institution by serious scholars and practitioners; whereas other Asian regional groupings around SAARC, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have acquired greater cohesion, depth and substance driven to a considerable extent by the example of European Union (EU).

Having such a background, SAARC underwent its first course of expansion by including Afghanistan as its eighth formal member, and by opening its door to observers from outside the region. Beginning with Japan, SAARC has so far invited Australia, China, European Union (EU), Iran, South Korea, Mauritius, Myanmar (Burma) and the United States of America (USA) as Observers. Russia has expressed its interest to be an Observer of SAARC, but no decision has yet been taken. Among the observers China and Iran has already expressed their interests to become full-fledged members of SAARC, thus producing heated debate within the organization. Some commentators (Inayat, 2007 and Sultana, 2007) consider the expansion as a landmark event in the history of this organization. Sultana suggested that the inclusion of Afghanistan as a member and nine other observers would certainly add new strength and dynamism to SAARC itself by ushering in an era of hope for around 1.6 billion people of South Asia, and open up a new door of cooperation beyond geograph-

1） Eight South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka comprise this regional body. Bangladesh's late President Ziaur Rahman first originated the idea in 1977.

ical boundaries of the region (2007: 140-41). There are, however, some experts (Shah, 2004; Mohan, 2007; Lawrence, 2011) who argue that the expansion might bring more challenges rather than cooperation due to the anomaly of relations among some members, and due to the ambiguous stand of the institution in regard to expansion.

It is in this backdrop, this paper makes an attempt to raise some relevant questions: Why did SAARC expand by including Afghanistan in spite of the latter being a precarious and internally unstable country? What are the motivations behind the observers' lining up with SAARC? Is the expansion well-suited with the existing institutional apparatus of SAARC? To what extend could the newcomers strengthen South Asian regional cooperation? The central argument of this article is that the inclusion of Afghanistan into SAARC is unlikely to produce any opportunity for SAARC's resilience and innovation towards additional avenues for sub-regional as well as inter-regional cooperation in foreseeable future unless Afghanistan could ensure domestic political and security stability of the country. And the inclusion of a number of major industrialized countries, especially Japan, as observers would open new avenues of opportunity for SAARC's prosperity if some well-equipped institutional mechanisms to engage with observers are adopted without delay. Hence the ball is largely in the courtyard of SAARC.

The paper is organized into five sections. The present section makes an introductory outline of the article; section two concentrates on the conceptual framework of expansion; section three focuses on the enlargement of SAARC, (1) by analyzing the potentials and challenges of Afghanistan's inclusion into SAARC, (2) by looking into the motivating factors that encouraged the observers to join SAARC and (3) by evaluating Japan-SAARC collaboration as a case study; section four investigates the institutional drawbacks of the expansion; and finally concluding remarks will be made in the last section of the paper.

2. Conceptual Framework of the Expansion of SAARC:

In the absence of a dominant theoretical paradigm to analyze the expansion of SAARC,[2] we shall employ constructivist approach relating to formal and informal components of organizational membership and norms. Constructivists like Ted Hopf (1998) and Alexander Wendt (1992) view identity as a mechanism to explain state practice, interests, and interactions internationally. Hopf argues that "identities offer each state an understanding of other states, its nature, motives, interests, probable actions, attitudes, and role in any given

2) It is important to note that much of the analysis of SAARC advances certain country specific foreign policy objectives. In fact, one of the inherent weaknesses in the existing literature on SAARC has been its narrow country focus, mostly framed within the context of the importance of SAARC within the overall strategic objectives of the foreign policy of India, the regional giant. It is because there are noticeably few books on SAARC from the perspective of other South Asian countries, not even from the perspective of Bangladesh- the founder of SAARC- whose foreign policy goals are said to be closely linked to the spirit of the association

political context" (1998: 175). He further adds that identity is understood to be a "particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actors" (1998: 176). Therefore, a constructivist approach to international relations assumes the centrality of national identity in the construction of national interest. Similarly Alexander Wendt provides a succinct account of this argument by marking identities as the basis of interests (1992: 398). He also argues that this amounts to a consideration of "their own identities and interests, which reflects beliefs about who they are in such situations; and what they think others will do, which reflect beliefs about identities and interests" (1999: 186-7).

Based on these assumptions, Wendt and other constructivists have attempted to develop an evolutionary model of identity formation, wherein "identities are produced and reproduced in the social process" (Wendt, 1999: 317). In this conceptualization of international system, structural change is possible provided that collective identity formation is present. Again, building on this work, there have been some constructivist approaches to regionalism and region-building, notably developing a school of thought that has been termed "new regionalism," in which regions play a very dynamic role characterized by economic interdependence. As Hossain argues, this is a dominant form of regional cooperation having direct linkage with globalization, as regionalism- generally termed as old regionalism- was largely influenced by the Cold War dynamics (2010: 45). Several multidimensional and complex factors have contributed to the rise of new regionalism which took place in a multi-polar world since 1990s. It is a more competitive, spontaneous and open process than regionalism promoting the concept of globalization as it is already mentioned. According to Hettne, new regionalism is "a multidimensional form of integration which includes economic, political, social and cultural aspects and thus goes far beyond the goal of creating region-based free trade regimes or security alliances" (1999: xvi). Unlike old regionalism, the concept of new regionalism signifies that market, multi-national companies (MNCs), elites and other non-state actors remain active and manifest themselves at several level of global system.[3] It also links developing and developed countries through Regional Trade Agreements (Burfishers, et. al., 2003: 6). Concisely, by embracing a more comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process new regionalism, as Hossain opines, promotes certain features of globalization such as free market economy, privatization and strong role of non-state actors; thus eliminating some of the limitations of old regionalism (2010: 52).

In order to cope with this paradigm shift SAARC perhaps has pursued trade liberalization through South Asian Preferential Trading Agreements (SAPTA) in 1993 and South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2004 with an aim to enhance economic growth. Likewise, this might have encouraged the SAARC leaders' to instigate the expansion of SAARC. As such, perhaps being influenced by the concept of new regionalism Pakistani Prime Minister, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani stated that "in an interdependent, fast globalizing world,

3） Hettne, Bjorn (1994) quoted in Sultana (2007), P. 143.

no regional grouping can hope to function in isolation. SAARC should develop positive links with the adjoining regions and beyond. We must adopt an inclusive approach. We should be open to mutually beneficial interactions, especially with our larger Asian neighborhood. Such linkages and interdependences would create a win-win support system."[4] The same sentiments were echoed in the voice of Indian foreign secretary, Shyam Saran when he said, "If we wish SAARC to move ahead, if we really want to achieve our dream of a South Asian economic union, unless we move forward to inter-connect within South Asia and interconnect from South Asia to the larger Asian capitals, then we cannot really move forward in any significant manner."[5] Hence, it can be claimed that being encouraged by the spirit of new regionalism, SAARC underwent its expansion which took place in two phases- by including Afghanistan as its 8th member, and then by opening up SAARC to the extra-regional observers.

Nonetheless, SAARC is widely recognized as a multilateral regional organization given that its membership structure is defined by geographical contiguity and it "coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct" (Takeshi, 2007: 66). We know that other regional and international organizations, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),[6] the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have altered, redefined and transformed their initial institutional aims and objectives as a consequence of their enlargement. In the case of SAARC, as we shall witness later, the Charter neither defines what exactly "South Asia" means, nor keeps any provision for expansion; thus, it keeps the whole procedure under vagueness. Rationalist and public choice theoretical approaches to the study of institutions suggest that distributional conflicts and tensions are likely to arise during an enlargement process on the basis of the expected redistribution of enlargement gains and relative loses after expansion (Lawrence, 2011: 30). Many believe that the people of South Asia until now do not view themselves as being part of a meaningful South Asian community[7] (as Europeans (EU) or even ASEAN community view themselves); but should there ever be a possibility that they develop a strong sense of collective identity, i.e., if they intend to develop a South Asian regional identity, such a prospect would be rigorously undermined by the inclusion of Afghanistan (and in future by incorporating China, Myanmar, Iran and/or even Mauritius) (Lawrence, 2011: 45-46). Therefore, the issue of the enlargement of SAARC by incorporating Afghanistan raises fundamental theoretical questions about building of regional identity. At the same time, the association's confusion

4) Address of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani at the 15th SAARC Summit, August 2, 2008.

5) Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran in his address at at the end of the 15th SAARC Summit in Dhaka. Quoted in Muni S.D. (ed.) (2010), *The Emerging Dimensions of SAARC*, Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd., P. 20. Also see, http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/nov/13saarc.htm (Accessed on April 17, 2014).

6) Since signing of the SCO Charter in 2002, the SCO defined its primary objectives in the form of common security concerns in Central Asia, and later promoted the idea of increasing economic cooperation between the SCO member states through a free trade area in Central Asia. The SCO has gradually adopted the position of that multilateral collaboration in trade, energy science, and technology should be adopted by the member states.

7) For more details on the possibility of a South Asian Community please see, Rahman, Atiur (2004), "SAARC- Not Yet a Community." The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. Available at: http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/RegionalFinal%20chapters/Chapter9Rahman.pdf

about how to cooperate with the external actors, i.e., observers also raises question about the viability of the said expansion. In the light of the above facts, the following sections will analyze the challenges and potentials that enlargement endures on SAARC.

3. Expansion of SAARC:

3.1 Inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC:

Afghanistan was an applicant for SAARC membership when the association was formed in 1985. However, after having considerable internal debates between India and Pakistan, for the first time in 2005 (at the 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka, Bangladesh) both the South Asian arch-rivals agreed to include Afghanistan as its member. Thus, Afghanistan was admitted as a full member of the association in 2007, and was formally introduced in all the SAARC agreements, declarations, and legal documents by a Joint Declaration. The declaration of the 14th summit (2007) welcomed the entry of Afghanistan into SAARC declaring that "[T]his was a historic moment as Afghanistan assumed its rightful place as a valued member of the SAARC fraternity."[8] By welcoming Afghanistan into the SAARC-family Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh emphasized that "this is an appropriate recognition of the long-standing ties of culture and history that Afghanistan shares with us" (*The Daily Star*, November 14, 2005). He favorably commented that the admission of Afghanistan in SAARC would complete South Asia's regional identity, and viewed Afghanistan as a valuable member of SAARC and South Asia's gateway to Central Asia and beyond (*Dawn*, April 4, 2007). Similarly, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz declared Afghanistan as "a natural and indispensable member" of the SAARC community. He went on, "I am sure Afghanistan will play its valuable role to enrich and strengthen our organization."[9] However, some commentators are of the opinion that "[T]he possibility of the US gently persuading India and Pakistan to let Afghanistan join SAARC to help reinforce legitimacy and stability to the Karzai regime cannot be ruled out" (Muni and Jetly, 2010: 21). In fact, the US viewed Afghanistan's membership of SAARC favorably as a signal that Afghanistan was prepared to engage politically in international organizations.

Nevertheless, well-informed sources argue that Afghanistan itself was not fully ready to take on full responsibility of membership in 2005. One of the reasons could be that SAARC membership might not be cost effective at a time when its main focus was on domestic stabilization and reconstruction (Nasreen, 2008). More importantly, Afghanistan's inclusion raised public debate and questions about the "notion of the malleability of a South Asian identity," (Lawrence, 2011: 33) posing serious challenge to the perception of South

8) Available at http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/14%20-%20New%20Delhi,%2014th%20Summit%203-4%20April%202007.pdf: para- 2.

9) Afghanistan News, April 3, 2007. Available at: www. Afghanistannews.net/story/238845

Asia as a monolithic region. In fact, the idea of Afghanistan's admission into SAARC was no more than re-defining the geographical limits of South Asia and perhaps also recognition of Afghanistan's pivotal role as a potential bridge between South Asia and, energy-rich Central and West Asia.[10] It is true that historically Afghanistan has strong cultural and commercial bonds with the South Asian countries for centuries. It is geographically contiguous to South Asia, and as a least developed country (LDC), Afghanistan does have some similarity with other LDCs in South Asia.[11] Therefore, Afghanistan's admission to SAARC carries some resonance.

However, while Afghanistan's main focus is on domestic stabilization and reconstruction, as it is already mentioned, how could its inclusion benefit other SAARC members' vis-à-vis Afghanistan? There was a viewpoint that having Afghanistan into SAARC would open a new horizon of opportunity for "SAARC's resilience and further innovation towards additional avenues for sub-regional co-operation as well as engineering inter-regional co-operation" (Shah, 2004: 358). Mariam Safi opines that Afghanistan can play a very critical and productive role in SAARC with initiatives such as the 'New Silk Road',[12] and in the extraction of its three trillion dollars' worth of mineral deposits. Similarly, SAARC can effectively assist Afghanistan by creating a political and economic environment facilitating political and security cooperation between SAARC borders; thus, fostering 'connectivity' in the entire South Asian region (2012: 61). Safi also argues that both the New Silk Road Initiative and extracting the natural resources of Afghanistan largely depend on the political and security stability of the country. It requires a fully integrated region, which also is a mandate of SAARC. One of the potential challenges to the above initiative is continued Indo-Pak rivalry which hinders easy transit of commodities from Afghanistan to India and vice versa (2012: 67).

President Hamid Karzai, in his maiden address at the 14th SAARC Summit commented that Afghanistan's full membership in SAARC would maximize benefits to people of the whole region and underscore the need for greater economic cooperation within member states. He also intended to look up to SAARC for development of his decade's long war-ravaged country.[13] President Karzai emphasized on expected trade links labeling his country as a land bridge connecting South Asia, Central Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East. He argued that "[o]ur vision for Afghanistan and its people is one where we act as a channel for growing regional trade."[14] He outlined Afghanistan's benefit in joining SAARC by reiterating that SAARC members "will also

10) See, Samshad Ahmad, "The SAARC Talk Shop," *Dawn*, Islamabad, April 9, 2007. Available at: http://www.dawn.com/news/1069997/dawn-opinion-april-09-2007; Also see, *The Nation*, August 9, 2008. Available at: http://www.nation.com.pk/columns/09-Aug-2008/The-Saarc-talk-shop

11) Author's e-mail conversation with Professor Dr. Akmal Hussain (Department of International Relations) of Dhaka University, Bangladesh on April 19, 2014.

12) For Details of the 'New Silk Road Initiative,' see Safi (2012), "Afghanistan: A Potential Hub for Prosperity or Insecurity?" in Delinic, Tomislav and Pandey, Nischal N (eds.) *SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation*. Center for South Asian Studies (CSAS) & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Kathmandu (Nepal), PP. 64-66.

13) Available at: http://www.dawn.com/news/240651/afghanistan-inducted-as-8th-member-14th-saarc-summit-begins

14) President Hamid Karzai's statement at the 14th SAARC Summit, April 3-4 (2007) in New Delhi, India. Available at: www.saarc-sec.org/data/summit14/afgprez.doc.

have greater ease of access to the Central and South Asian markets, and the regions' natural resources which are crucial drivers of economic growth."[15] In this connection, President Karzai made special reference to the proposed 'Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline Project,' and urged to make it a priority. However, many intellectuals believe that regional cooperation rather than international involvement will prove to be beacon of success in Afghanistan and this must be assessed, analyzed and further developed on by SAARC if it is to achieve greater connectivity in the decade to come.

3.2 Welcoming Observers in SAARC:

Apart from including Afghanistan as its 8th member, the 13th SAARC Summit also approved the inclusion of countries and international organizations as observers. The summit declaration "acknowledged the renewed interest of other regional and international organizations, bodies and entities to cooperate with SAARC in various collaborative endeavors in accordance with the objectives and priorities of SAARC".[16] However, as SAARC was not institutionally equipped to incorporate observers, the modalities for granting observer status were discussed at the 27th Council of Ministers' meeting held in Dhaka in August 2006. Finally, the 15th SAARC Summit held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on August 2-3, 2008 approved a set of guidelines for cooperating with observers. The guidelines included the provision that SAARC observers pledge to subscribe to the tenets outlined in the SAARC Charter and objectives. Procedurally, the guidelines enable a SAARC observer country to attend the opening and closing sessions of a SAARC Summit. According to the guidelines, "[A]n observer may participate in the open sessions of the Summit, the Council of Ministers and other Ministerial Meetings."[17] Similarly, "[A]n observer may be invited to other SAARC meetings after the Secretary General obtains the approval of members of the Standing Committee."[18] But the guidelines circumscribe an observer to make any statements about areas of concern during meetings, or at Summits; but they can make proposals regarding cooperation and joint venture projects with the approval of the relevant SAARC committees.

However, seven observers, namely Japan, China, US, Mauritius, EU, South Korea and Iran joined the 14th SAARC Summit in New Delhi on April 3-4, 2007. At the 15th Summit in Colombo, Sri Lanka on August 2-3, 2008, Australia and Myanmar were included as Observers bringing the total tally of observers to nine; thus, outnumbering the eight-nation regional grouping. On the eve of the 14th SAARC Summit former Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon commented on the prospective role of observers by saying that there could be cooperation between SAARC and the observer countries in trade and counter-terrorism as well as

15）Ibid.
16）Summit Declaration of the 13th SAARC summit, November 12-13, 2005 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Available at: http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/13%20-%20Dhaka%20-%2013th%20Summit%2012-13%20Nov%202005.pdf
17）Documents received from the SAARC Secretariat, March 7, 2014.
18）Ibid.

social and economic sectors (*The Hindu*, April1, 2007). At the Summit meeting, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh offered a more tangible understanding to label who SAARC observers could be. He remarked, "We also had the privilege of welcoming Observers for the first time. They are among our major civilisational neighbours and economic partners. This manifests our common desire for SAARC to be outward looking and engaged with the world community; to be a springboard for exploiting the vast physical and intellectual resources of South Asia" (Quoted in Baru, 2010: 231). Prime Minister Singh defined Observers as "civilisational neighbours" and "economic partners," that fits all existing observers. We can consider China and Iran as our civilisational partner without any doubt; while Japan, US, EU, South Korea and Australia are important economic partners of South Asian countries. For Myanmar and Mauritius, they are our "geographical neighbours," and very much part of South Asian civilization.

What are the reasons behind this recent surge of interest amongst outside actors to be associated with SAARC? The presence of five major economies from outside the region, namely the USA, China, Japan, South Korea and the EU extended the appeal of SAARC to the larger international community. Some analysts, however, alarm that the involvement of a growing number of observers represents both challenges and opportunities for the sustainability of the association. Khan's (2009) opinion is of special significance in this connection. He opines, "while it enhances the international stature of SAARC and creates strong imperatives for peace and cooperation, it can boost foreign direct investment, open up transit trade facilities, provide connectivity and promote inter-regional trade and economic cooperation opportunities among the member states" (Khan, 2009: 2). At the same time, the presence of too many international observers with conflicting policy agendas "can also lead to new power games in South Asia as states with divergent political agendas register their presence and pursue their strategic objectives in the SAARC" (Khan, 2009: 16). But, in general, their presence symbolized the enhanced interest of the international community in the functioning of SAARC, and their association with SAARC would bring some positive impact on South Asia vis-à-vis SAARC. Therefore, although the level of interest and motivation for participating in SAARC as an observer varies, there is a general acceptance that South Asia is an important security and economic hub (Baru, 2010: 230). This interest, however, has gained salience against the background of rising global concern with terrorism, with Afghanistan and Pakistan emerging as it's 'epicenter;' and 'nuclearization' of South Asia, with India and Pakistan being the actors. Again, the issue of global interest is, perhaps the acceleration of economic growth and increased economic openness in the region as a whole, keeping India atop.

3.3 Japan-SAARC Collaboration:

Japan was very encouraged by the formation of SAARC in 1985 aspiring to see multilateral cooperation in trade, investment and social sectors ushering in confidence and trust in a region of conflict and mistrust (Rahman, 2007), and termed it as a major regional development in South Asia (Diplomatic Bluebook, 1986). In

his address at the Indian Parliament on April 30, 1990, then Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu presented his country's vision of "building a new world through cooperation" and offered formal cooperation between Japan and SAARC (The *EIR*, May 25, 1990). Analysts, however, expected that Kaifu's offer of formal cooperation between Japan and SAARC would foster multilateralism and regionalism (two important features of Japanese foreign policy) in the South Asian region, act as an initiative to revive the organization, elevate it to the same level of the ASEAN. Today Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter MOFA) views SAARC "as an association significant for its ability to provide a platform for the stability and development of the South Asian region."[19] To reinforce the activities of SAARC and implement a variety of support and exchange programs, Japan established the SAARC-Japan Special Fund (hereafter SJSF) on September 17, 1993- the only financial support until now as the first and sole fund financed by a non-member country from outside the region (MOFA, 2009). In fact, the SJSF symbolizes Japan's financial contribution toward the organization to encourage intra-regional cooperation between SAARC member states and intellectual exchanges between Japan and members countries of SAARC (Shimizu, 2006: 61-62). Utilization of Japanese expertise in selected areas such as in disaster management, trans-border transportation, and energy projects are the priority areas of SJSF (Malik, 2009: 161). Japan's financial contribution to the fund during 1993-2010 stood around US$4.73 million.[20] In 2007, Japan contributed another US$7 million to the SJSF under the JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) Program with an aim to implement youth exchange programs. The JENESYS Program is a large-scale youth exchange initiative announced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the 2nd East Asia Summit (EAS) held in January 2007 in Philippines for the period of 2007-2011.

Japan's relations with the SAARC vis-à-vis South Asia further strengthened with the decision to grant observer status to Japan resulting in fast growth of economic and cultural relations between Japan and South Asian countries. Japan's MOFA voiced gratitude over its entry in the SAARC as an observer, and expected that in order for Japan and the SAARC to run really together, people to people exchanges should come atop the priority list. In an interview with the *Daily Star* former Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso acknowledged that Japan had long recognized the importance of SAARC as an organization that could provide a framework for stability and development in the South Asian region. Based on this recognition, Japan had supported the activities of SAARC and worked to enhance its foundations through the SJSF,[21] as it is already mentioned. Aso also revealed that Japan intended to continue to make efforts to further strengthen relations with SAARC, in close cooperation with all member countries. One idea was to strengthen functional cooperation, utilizing the SJSF, in a form whereby it would be possible to share Japan's knowledge and expertise in issues that has

19）Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of Japan (2013), "Japan-SAARC Relations." Available at: http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/saarc/ (Accessed on April 29, 2014).

20）Data received from Japanese Embassy, Kathmandu, Nepal on March 6, 2014.

21）Former Foreign Minister Taro Aso's interview with Mr. Monzurul Huq, Tokyo correspondent of *The Daily Star* on February 10, 2006. Available at: http://archive.thedailystar.net/2006/02/10/d60210150198.htm

been of particular interest in the South Asia region, such as the fight against terrorism and disaster prevention.[22] In his speech at the 14th SAARC Summit, Mr. Taro Aso further articulated that Japan attached great importance to its relationship with South Asia, which, according to him "makes up the central pillar of the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity." Therefore, the motivation of Japan engaging with SAARC, as it was echoed by Mr. Aso, would lie in its support for (1) democracy and peace-building; (2) promotion of regional connectivity; and (3) promotion of person-to-person exchanges.[23] At the 15th SAARC Summit in Sri Lanka in 2008, then Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura communed a message that also incorporated specific measures of support for SAARC in the above three areas. He particularly emphasized on "connectivity" as a means to bring the rich potentials that South Asia enjoys to fruition.[24]

Japan took interest about SAARC since its beginning in 1985. Japan was the first country to express its intention to be associated with SAARC during the visit of Prime Minister Kaifu to the South Asian region in April 1990. Until now Japan is the only country to introduce a fund (SJSF, 1993) to cooperate with the regional body. Japan was the 'number one' to seek observer status of SAARC even before China did so. Japan's 'goodwill' towards SAARC is also demonstrated by the former's decision to appoint its Ambassador to Nepal as the Permanent Representative of Japan to SAARC since April 2012 which "is a clear expression of Japan's firm commitment to further strengthen the friendly and cordial relationship that exists between SAARC and Japan. Japan sincerely wishes to continue working closely with the SAARC Secretariat as well as Member States to achieve this end."[25] Therefore, Japan's case seems significant to this author. In fact, observer status has theoretically given Japan more opportunity to expand cooperation with South Asia on a regional basis, and South Asia also has got the same leverage to involve Japan under multilateral framework in South Asia. But in reality SAARC could neither offer concrete framework, nor could involve Japan to connect with proper projects to invigorate regional cooperation in the South Asian region. It is highly desirable that SAARC will develop appropriate institutional mechanisms to engage with Japan, formulate tangible policy proposals to benefit from Japan's long experience of multilateral cooperation.

4. Putting the Cart before the Horse?

As it is already mentioned, the issue of the expansion of SAARC has been a very important question since its first surge of expansion in 2005. A study of the SAARC Charter brings out an important fact that there is

22) Ibid.

23) Statement by Mr. Taro Aso, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the 14th SAARC Summit held in New Delhi, April 3, 2007. Available at: www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/saarc/state0704.html. Also see, www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/saarc/summary0704.html, and www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/saarc/overview.html

24) Retrieved from the statement by Mr. Masahiko Koumura, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the 15th SAARC Summit held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 2, 2008. Available at:http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/exdfam/20080802.S1E.html

25) Available at: http://www.np.emb-japan.go.jp/ann/270412b.html. Although the there is no mechanism within the framework of SAARC to acknowledge the Envoys of observer countries, nor even the member states' Missions in Kathmandu.

no definition of what exactly constitutes 'South Asia'.[26] Shah argues that "[P]ossibly it is as much a reflection of difficulties in that regard from a purely geographical point of view as it is to the desire of the Founding Fathers of SAARC to leave a scope of expansion" (2004: 357-58). However, there is no provision for expansion in the present SAARC Charter. Former SAARC Secretary General Rahim's view is of special importance in this respect. In an interview with this author Ambassador Rahim reminded that Afghanistan applied for membership of SAARC during his tenure (January 2002-February 2005), and as the Secretary General he was not in favor of Afghanistan's inclusionas a full member. In reality, when Afghanistan was included as a SAARC member in 2005, it was neither in a position to contribute much to the SAARC process because of its economic, political and security limitations, nor could benefit much from SAARC. [27] Knowledgeable sources argued that even Kabul was not prepared to take on full responsibilities of membership. Rahim, however, suggested that first of all SAARC should have adopted some provisions for members and observers by specifying the rights and obligations for them. It was only then the door would be open for newcomers. Countries that could fulfill the requirement of SAARC and also would be willing to fulfill their responsibilities towards SAARC could become observers. And once they become observer, they should have the right to attend the Summit meetings and working level meetings (at their own choice where they can contribute, or can benefit from). In this way, their involvement would increase gradually and over the time they would be able to attend all the meetings and stages of SAARC. In this way SAARC could have internal cohesion and bring solidarity among the actors involved.[28] In other words, SAARC could adopt a cautiously optimistic outlook towards Afghanistan, and also could take on a 'wait and watch' approach. It even could offer Afghanistan an observer status first and then if Afghanistan could prove her preparedness to be associated with SAARC as a full member, then the issue could be considered in the near future.

But in reality, the 13th SAARC Summit admitted Afghanistan as its 8th member and welcomed Japan and China as the first two observers, details of which is discussed in the previous section of this article. In an interview with this author, another commentator echoed almost the same view regarding the expansion of SAARC. According to him, SAARC even could not deal with its existing member countries in a cohesive way. Therefore, the inclusion of Afghanistan would not help SAARC in terms of cohesion; rather it would complicate the SAARC process. Member states of SAARC should emphasis cohesion, solidarity among existing members; involve in real economic issues for the development of the region; should amend the SAARC Charter and the decision making process since the principle of unanimity is a major drawback for SAARC.[29]

26）See the Preamble and Article 1 of the SAARC Charter.

27）Author's personal interview with Ambassador QAMA Rahim, Former Secretary General of SAARC on March 16, 2014 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

28）Ibid. In this regard, we can also refer to ASEAN which could indeed become a bigger organization overnight with new members from Timor-Leste and Papua New Guiena. Since Timor-Leste gained its independence in 1999, there was intense excitement about the prospect of 11th member in ASEAN. Now almost 15 years have elapsed, and Timor-Leste is still preparing itself for ASEAN membership.

29）Author's personal interview with Dr. Delwar Hossain, Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh on March 18, 2014.

SAARC faces the same problem with observers. Even today SAARC could not develop any concrete institutional mechanisms to deal with observers. Also accepting observers without any institutional mechanism goes against the spirit of the Charter of SAARC. Therefore, it is a time demand to amend the Charter.[30] On the issue of working with the observers, officials at the Secretariat informed this author that the Secretariat has not yet been able to formulate any 'code of conduct' for the observers, as the Secretariat is the coordinator and/or facilitator of the agreed areas of cooperation and has very little to do with the observers unless the member states reach any consensus about them. Until now observers' role is limited only to deliver speeches at Summits in front of the regional supreme leaders.[31] Therefore, it is very unfortunate that, even today neither the observers are aware of their rights and obligations towards SAARC, nor does SAARC know how it can accommodate observers. Thus, without equipping enough institutional schemes to incorporate new members and/or observers, SAARC had its first course of expansion, as if by '*putting the cart before the horse.*'

5. Conclusion:

As SAARC is going to celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2015, it is important to establish that the institution must be transformed to develop into an effective tool of regional collaboration. SAARC had occasionally raised hopes that it could serve as an effective engine for the achievement of its admirable goals. However, its emphasis on its 'transition from the *declaration phase* to the *implementation phase* of its objectives' (15th Summit, 2008) encouraged the 1.6 billion people of the region and its extra-regional observers. In line with that, some commentators consider the inclusion of Afghanistan and nine other observers as a decisive breakthrough for SAARC. SAARC members welcomed the expansion as they opted for greater cooperation beyond the region. It was expected that the presence of so many big powers, namely the US, Japan, China, Australia, South Korea and the EU in SAARC would bring positive effects on various sectors such as poverty alleviation, diffusion of bilateral rivalries in the region, people-to-people contact, energy security, and other security issues in the region. But in reality, could expansion generate greater regional cooperation in the South Asian region as it was expected at the initial stages of the said enlargement?

Firstly, the inclusion of Afghanistan as a SAARC member raises important questions for the viability of regional cooperation in the region. Afghanistan is currently in the midst of a security transition process, which is scheduled to witness security shift from NATO-ISAF to Afghan National Army by the end of 2014. In the meantime, Afghanistan had its much-talked Presidential election on April 5, 2014. This election is significant because it will mark the first successful transition of power from one elected leader to another who will have to oversee a transition during which a majority of international troops will be withdrawing from Afghanistan.

30）Ibid.
31）Author's interview with anonymous Directors at the SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu, Nepal on March 3-4, 2014.

At the time of the writing of this article Afghanistan is waiting for the results of the June 14 runoff elections between the two rival candidates. However, it would be unscholarly to predict for likely political stability of the country in near future. SAARC is expected to seriously assess whether Afghanistan is able to provide security for itself beyond 2014 and determine how it can extend its cooperation in stabilizing its war-torn member-country. Afghanistan will need the assistance of SAARC increasingly in this transition more than in the past eight years since its inclusion.

Secondly, as we have seen, SAARC is still ill-equipped to absorb the presence of external actors' as observers of the regional body. Until now neither the observers are aware of their rights and obligations towards SAARC, nor does SAARC know how it can accommodate observers, as it is already mentioned. Therefore, this represents a failure of institutional design and absence of strategic vision of SAARC having important consequences for the future relevance of the organization. In his interview with scholars and commentators in Japan, this author got the perception that Japan, who had been single-mindedly focused on assisting SAARC in its development, might have lost its previous enthusiasm towards SAARC as the later could not offer concrete methods to engage with Japan in a more dynamic way. This might have encouraged Japan to emphasis on bilateral relationship with individual SAARC countries, with special focus on Indo-Japan transformational relations, thus undermining the spirit of Japan-SAARC multilateral cooperation. One way to reinvigorate Japan-SAARC relation is to offer full dialogue partnership to Japan under "SAARC+1" arrangement, thus, conferring unique status to Japan. SAARC Secretariat also can organize a special summit on "Japan-SAARC Collaboration" to find out appropriate projects to focus through mutual dialogue with Japan. In this respect it is necessary to adopt some urgent structural mechanisms. Again SAARC can learn from the experience of ASEAN, and hence the ball is largely in the courtyard of SAARC.

However, there are points of optimism that the 17th SAARC Summit in Maldives (2011) agreed to undertake a comprehensive review of all matters relating to its engagement with observers, including the question of dialogue partnership. In the meantime, Russia and Turkey have expressed their desire to be observers of SAARC at a time when the rationale and objective of SAARC observer consortium is being discussed among the member states. We earnestly hope that the 18th SAARC Summit (supposed to be held in November, 2014) in Kathmandu, Nepal will adapt realistic approaches towards observers, so that expansion of SAARC does not pose challenges towards fostering regional integration and cooperation in South Asian region; rather it strengthens regional cooperation. We strongly believe that the new political leadership of South Asia will play a historic role in reinvigorating and transforming SAARC into a workable regional organization like what we witness in the ASEAN framework in Southeast Asia.

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