

Conflicts and Conflict Management in SAARC: Assessing the Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

The mechanism created by South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) excludes the discussions on bilateral and contentious issues which is said to be the main hurdle in the SAARC to take off. Despite similarities in the South Asian member countries, e.g. cultural, linguistic, and historical, they have not yet been able to evolve cooperative environment and their relations are characterised by varying conflicts. Keeping with the background nominal progress that has been made by SAARC, it will be wise to review the inter-state conflicts which are halting the ways of the South Asian progress. The present study surveys the nature of interstate conflict among SAARC members and their impact on regional cooperation. It also explores various modes of conflict management and conflict resolution. It offers conflict management and multi-track diplomacy as keys to peace in the South Asian region and progress for SAARC.

Keywords: SAARC, ASEAN, South Asia, Regionalism, Peace, Conflict, Conflict Resolution

1. Introduction

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in December 1985 with the idea to work together to address common problems of South Asian Countries (SACs). It aimed to improve the quality of lives of their people as well as to promote economic development, social progress and develop mutual understanding and friendly relations among the member countries. The organization has entered fourth decade of its existence but is still far away from achieving its desired goals. Scholars of politics and international relations have identified various impediments to the SAARC process, which include: i) Inability of SAARC to tackle the interstate conflicts that further gravitate the bilateral disputes and the nationalistic interests of the member states; ii) Indo-centric threat perceptions in member states; iii) Lack of trust among the regional elites, and; iv) Lack of functional approach of cooperation in non-controversial areas, i.e., social and cultural fields (Shahab, 2012). Persistence of the outstanding political problems and bilateral disputes of SACs are major obstacle to the success of SAARC.

2. Literature Review

There are around 38 Regional, International, and Global Organizations (RIGOs) that have clear

mandate of supporting international peace and security encompassing the activities of prevention, management, and resolution of conflict, besides peace keeping, peace enforcement, peace-making, and peacebuilding (Travares, 2010). Thirty-one RIGOs are playing more active role in this field, thus, complimenting the role of UN, (Wallenstein & Bjurner, 2015). In fact, some of the founders of the UN, such as Winston Churchill desired to build UN system on the “massive pillars” of RIGOs but what materialized was a compromise and is reflected in Chapter-VIII of the UN Charter. Article 52 of the UN Charter authorizes “regional arrangements or agencies”, i.e. RIGOs, to undertake “appropriate...action” and activities, consistent with principles and purposes of UN Charter, in order to deal with “matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security.” It explicitly stipulates that RIGOs or their members “shall make every effort to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes” and UN Security Council (UNSC) “shall encourage” such moves. Article 53 stipulates that UNSC “shall, where appropriate, utilize” RIGOs for “enforcement action under its authority. But no enforcement action shall be taken” under or by any RIGO “without the authorisation” of UNSC, with the exception of measures against any enemy state.” Article 54 provides that UNSC “shall at all times be kept fully informed of activities undertaken [by RIGOs] for the maintenance of international peace and security.”

During Cold War, RIGOs could not play their role as effectively as envisioned in the UN Charter because the institutions and the conflicts in this era were dominated by various interests of the superpowers. However, in the post-Cold War era, the importance of RIGOs was increasingly acknowledged and therefore more active role was seen while dealing with interstate and intrastate conflicts of diverse nature in various parts of the world. In fact, RIGOs were encouraged to play this role to “cope with the frailty” of the UN which lacked “the capacity, resources and expertise” to deal with the contemporary problems. As such, the UN itself acknowledged that the support for and active role of RIGOs was “both necessary and desirable (Travares, 2010). The role of RIGOs was reemphasized by the fact that majority of the contemporary conflicts are regional and even domestic political problems have either regional dimensions or ramifications. These problems and conflicts need solution at the regional level and RIGOs are better quipped in terms of their knowledge, proximity, ability, and immediate interest in such issues besides having shared norms and values among its member states. Due to these reasons, conflicting parties including states are more likely to accept the influence, role, and even intervention by RIGOs to help address political problems and manage and resolve conflicts (Travares, 2010).

There were, however, factors that brought the role of RIGOs at the forefront. After the 1990s, UN became so overburdened that it had to rely more on regional and sub-regional organizations for the aim of peace keeping (Wulf, 2009). RIGOs increasingly realized that it is in their interest to avoid wars which would bring devastating effects to the region. Thus, RIGOs need to respond quickly in case of any conflict among their member states. As Wulf (2009) noted, RIGOs can play important roles, i.e. they can help: a) address security threats; b) monitor peace agreements, and; c) issue early warnings. RIGOs are increasingly seen as the effective forums to help in easing tensions, pacifying conflicts, and finding well durable solutions to the international conflicts. UN considers the regional organizations complementary actors to its goal of supporting international peace and stability. However, sometimes the “approach syndrome” of regional organizations vs. UN creates certain misunderstandings. The job of global bodies and RIGOs in interstate conflict management is well known and they are complementary to each other. But sometimes, a conflict in their approach or perspective may depict an opposite picture. For instance, in case of Myanmar, there is a difference of interests

and norms between Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the UN (Rakhmatia, 2010).

Table-1: Comparison between UN and ASEAN

	United Nations	ASEAN
Level	Global	Regional
Competencies	Comprehensive organization	Comprehensive organization
Functional	Program organization	Program organization
Decision Making Authority	Loosely binding	Loosely binding
Delegation	Intergovernmental	Inter-governmental
Norms	Liberal peace, democracy, human rights, free market, use of force, preventive diplomacy, humanitarian intervention	Sovereignty, non-interference, no use of force, regional autonomy, ASEAN way
Conflict Management Approach	Interventionist engagement	Constructive engagement
	Use of force	No use of force
	Formality	Informality
	Mega-phone diplomacy	Quiet diplomacy

Source: Institute for Development and Peace.

Wulf (2009) highlighted the weaknesses of RIGOs. He asserted that regional organizations suffered from at least five weaknesses: i) lack of common values; ii) contested sovereignty; iii) overlapping responsibilities; iv) lack of capacity, and; v) dominant regional power (Idrees & Ayaz, 2015). However, RIGOs are more effective and useful than the UN in conflict management (Diehl & Joseph, 2007). It is because of the following facts: a) these organizations have greater consensus because they have similar levels of development, similar political manifestations and common regional problems; b) regional organization could have greater support from the disputant and local population thus they can be more effective than UN missions because their actions are regional; c) the UN generally helps negotiating ceasefires and deploying peacekeeping forces but it has not often facilitated final settlement to a conflict on the other hand RIGOs can not only have conflict management but also pave the way for final conflict resolution, and; d) In case of third party mediation to the conflict the regional organization could have a better control over the efforts of the party than the UN.

3. Methods and Materials

The current study is an attempt to analyse the debilitating effects of the ousting bilateral issues from SAARC agenda on its overall performance and functioning. It has been divided into five sections. After the brief introduction, the second section surveys the available literature on the role of regional intergovernmental organizations (RIGOs) in supporting international peace and security. After methods and materials, fourth section highlights the complexities in SAARC, intrastate conflict among its members and their impact on the process of regional cooperation. Fourth also section investigates how conflicts can be managed among SAARC members as well as the approaches regional countries have so far pursued to address their mutual problems. Fifth section carries the conclusions based on the analysis and findings of the study. This study

involved qualitative approach and used historical as well as comparative methods. It used primary sources such as SAARC documents and secondary sources including books and research articles. The study used content analysis method to interpret and analyse data.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. SAARC and the Regional Complexities

South Asia is unique region in various aspects and so is SAARC. South Asia is a heterogeneous politically, culturally, religiously, ideologically, and politically. The disparities in size, power, and level of economic development among the member states further complicate the situation. The political outlook and foreign policy orientations of SACs are inconsistent. The value system and basic principles of states formation in South Asia exhibit divergence. India is a secular federal democracy while the democracies and public opinions in Pakistan and Bangladesh are guided by the religious ideologies of Islam. Maldives though consists of an Islamic society, yet the reigns of politics are free from religion. Nepal is Hindu cultured while Bhutan and Sri Lanka practice Buddhism. These diversities and more frankly nationalism also sound in their national and foreign policies formation and their interactions with each other. Unlike European Economic Community (EEC) and ASEAN there was no feeling of external threat in SAARC. The members of both ASEAN and EEC viewed their respective organizations as not just only right but also an essential response to external threat. Nevertheless, SACs had no such feeling of external threat as the EEC or ASEAN did; majority of SACs view that threat arises from domestic troubles or regional time-wasting demands. As such, “South Asia displays as different political order and power structures as one seldom finds in any other geopolitical region of the world.”

In the international relations foreign policies of states are representatives of their supreme national interests, and nothing but national interests is permanent. But for the sake of regional benefits national interests may be little bit modified if not fully sacrificed. Regionalism may become fruitful only after members agree on sharing of state sovereignty and decision making, which is still a pre-requisite for success of SAARC. Nationalistic tendencies are clear in the approach and considerations of regional behaviour of SAARC members. The societies in Europe were highly nationalistic that led to the two World Wars after which they thought of cooperation that bore fruits and today one listen more about EU than Germany, France, or Britain. Stanley Hoffmann argued that nationalism in Europe had receded in the immediate post-war era. Therefore, it paved the way for successful beginning of the regional integration process (Ahmad, 2013). Peaceful relations among member states are the key to regional cooperation. Sridharan (2008), noted that no region is without intra-regional differences and the ASEAN region too suffers from unresolved bilateral issues. But the possibility of open warfare between ASEAN members seems farfetched unlike the case of SAARC countries. Hashmi (1979) noted that EU members had denounced the use or threat of use of force in their mutual relations and have decided to settle their differences, if any, through peaceful means that laid the solid foundations for durable integration process in Europe.

As clear from their dealings, SAARC members gave precedent to self-centric approach that is very harmful for the whole region. The approach of majority of the SAARC countries is the West cantered or they take interest in other regional organizations more than they do in SAARC. Mahindra Rajapaksa, the Sri Lankan president once aptly remarked that “we often tend to provide priority to our engagement with extra regional actors and we are not devoted

to further develop and strengthen links within our own regional organization” (Pattanaik, 2006). One of the main reasons of extra-regional linkages of Smaller Regional Countries SRCs with Western countries and China is their fear of Indian domination compounded with their unresolved disputes with New Delhi. The Indian size and strength gave rise to suspicions in its neighbouring countries which are worried about the Indian dominance of the region and her interference in their internal affairs (Shahab, 2012). This suspicion is discernible in their approach towards seeking security assistance and alliances outside their region. The regional cooperation process under SAARC has been retarded due the fear of SRCs surrounding India. As Pattanaik (2006) noted, SRCs are mindful that interdependence will lessen their autonomy and bargaining power to settle their disputes with India.

Other RIGOs are not passing through this nausea; neither European Union (EU) nor ASEAN experienced such a situation. Neither dominant position of Germany in EU nor that of Indonesia in ASEAN is dispute bearing in their respective regions. Delinic (2012) puts that India fears its neighbours may join to halt Indian interests in the region. More likely Pakistan and China besides other SAARC members would do so. But India’s self-image demands habitual obedience from its neighbours. As Bhatta noted, India regard South Asia as its backyard (Idrees & Ayaz, 2015). India’s prominent position is one of the hurdles in the way of regional integration in South Asia (Delinic, 2012). For security reasons, SRCs tend to create outside links to improve their fear of a regional hegemon. Indian size, military might, and political and economic weight overshadow all other regional counterparts. The Indian influence over the region has been said to be hegemonic which has created feelings of insecurity in the smaller neighbours. The geography of India and her economic might make her logically sound to drive SAARC for success. India and Pakistan are responsible for the uneven progress and less effectiveness of SAARC. The debilitating effects of these rivalries have been large and determine the course of South Asian Regionalism (Sridharan, 2008).

Another implication of this scenario is that India borders all its neighbours except Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan border one another directly and the other SAARC members indirectly through the corridor of India. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal are not far from each other, yet separated by the Indian Territory (Delinic, 2012). The possibility of trade between them passes through an Indian corridor. Therefore, the practicality of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) demands India to do more. The Indian corridor will be of profound effect in terms of trade and connectivity if the differences are patched up. SAARC is not a successful RIGO particularly in creating peace and harmony in the region. The organization is faced with various challenges, the most significant of which are grave inter-state conflicts that keep its member states apart and hesitant to cooperate. South Asian region took for-long in accommodating their mutual suspensions and their behaviour exposes antagonism rather than cordiality and friendship. The cloud of hostility surrounds the entire South Asian region, and this cloud has no positive aspects. South Asia has been described as “the most dangerous place in the world.” The region is still tagged in the history of “bilateral dispute-ism.” Inter-state conflicts impede the growth of regionalism; SAARC is its better example (Shahab, 2012).

4.2. Intrastate Conflicts in South Asia

The history of SAARC shows that the organization is fraught with mistrust from its very inception and paralyzed because of inter-state conflicts and dynamics of cold war power politics in which India was a Soviet ally and Pakistan was linked to US sponsored Western alliances. Four types of conflicts that impede process of substantive regional integration have

been identified (Shahab, 2012), which include: i) Territorial Conflicts; ii) Cross border terrorism; iii) Conflict over natural resources, and; iv) Conflicts related to immigrants and refugees (Idrees & Ayaz, 2015). Territorial conflicts involve those between India and Pakistan, such as over control on Siachen, Sir Creek, and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). J&K issue has been the cause of disagreement between the two countries from 1947 and it led them to advance their aims through active and proxy wars. It is in their common interest to resolve the big problem, i.e., J&K issue so the smaller issues could find itself its ways out (Ahmad, 2006). Afghanistan's reluctance to accept Durand Line as a legitimate border with Pakistan is also a major irritant in Pak-Afghan bilateral relations that also gave rise to instability and militancy in the region. Bangladesh and India have disputes over common borders and maritime boundaries. Nonetheless, the border issues and most importantly, the Kashmir dispute have dominated the whole region.

The second type of conflicts revolve around perceived or real role of the regional countries in sponsoring cross border terrorism and fomenting insurgencies in neighbouring countries. For instance, both India and Pakistan blame one another for cross border terrorist activities. New Delhi blames Pakistan for cross border infiltration and supporting militancy in Indian held Kashmir (IHK) as well as of certain acts of terror inside India perpetuated by non-state actors. Meanwhile, Pakistan strongly believes that India was engaged in fomenting trouble in Baluchistan and sponsoring other terrorist groups including Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Islamabad holds that India is using soil of Muslim neighbouring countries, i.e. Iran and Afghanistan to destabilize it. The collaboration between India's intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) against the interest of Pakistan has been highlighted various times. India also supported Tamil revolt in Sri Lanka, Chakma uprising in Bangladesh and Maoists insurgency in Nepal using terrorism as a tool of its foreign policy to advance its aims in South Asia. Earlier, New Delhi had nurtured Mukti Bahini in East Pakistan followed by open intervention to disintegrate Pakistan in 1971 (Ahmad, 2018). These issues stemmed out of the unresolved political problems and bilateral disputes of regional countries. For instance, militancy in IHK, which Pakistan regards an indigenous movement of Kashmiri people, is a consequence of the outstanding issue of J&K. This issue needs a durable solution because both the rivals are nuclear powers. The unresolved disputes between both countries can escalate into a nuclear war posing a serious threat to regional peace and security.

There are disputes over the distribution of natural resources, distribution of waters of shared international rivers between regional countries. India and Pakistan had signed Indus Water Treaty (IWT) in 1960, to solve their mutual difference over distribution of waters resources in Indus Basin. The treaty is still enforced despite bilateral wars and occasional tensions between the two countries. However, gradually tensions between them arose after India started construction of scores of water reservoirs on three western rives given to Pakistan under IWT that Pakistan views as violation of the treaty. Pakistan have serious concerns over construction of dams by India, including Wullar, Baglihar, Kishanganga, Nimoo Bazgo, Uri-II and Dul Hasti as completion of these projects would have far reaching negative implications for the country. India also helps Afghanistan to construct dams on rives flowing into Pakistan. New Delhi and Kathmandu experienced tense relations over sharing of their common rivers particularly on distribution of gains accumulated through construction of water projects in Nepal by India, include, Kosi, Gandak, Tanakpur, and Mahakali. Dhaka has serious concerns over construction of several water projects by India on their common rivers, most importantly on construction of Farakha Barrage and River Linkage Project that would significantly transfer

water from northern and eastern parts of India to its southern and western parts with potentially horrible repercussions for Bangladesh.

The conflicts over refugees and illegal cross border movement also plague relations of SAARC members. Pakistan hosts millions of Afghan refugees for the last five decades or so with adverse effects on its politics, culture, economy, and security. These refugees not only pose security threats for Pakistan but also soured its relations with Afghanistan as Afghan militant groups use refugee camps for shelter. The cross-border movement of people on Durand Line also creates tension between the two countries. Pakistan has started closing Afghan refugees' camps and sealing the border with Afghanistan to stop the inflow of Afghan refugees and militants that run their network on both sides of the common border and cause instability in the region. Meanwhile, Indian government has reservations over alleged cross border movement of Bengalis who come to India for employment and other purposes but a part of them are also allegedly involved in criminal activities. New Delhi wants Bangladesh to stop the illegal immigration of Bengalis into her land. Katmandu too is concerned over unregulated entry of Indian citizens into Nepal posing security and economic challenges to the country. Nepal and Bhutan too have similar problems that occasionally sour their bilateral ties.

All these developments hijack the organization's routine business. For example, the Eleventh SAARC Summit was held after three years of postponement, following the Kargil War and military coup in Pakistan in 1999 (Naazer et al., 2017). Observing these developments Sridharan (2008) said, this happened because India was not willing to take part seriously. Pakistan denounced the Indian postponement in strong words. Moreover, it held India responsible for the breach of established norms of Inter-state relations and most severely the SAARC Charter (Ahmad 2017). The troubling relations between India and Bangladesh over borders brought the two countries into active use of force in 2001 which took the lives of nineteen soldiers (Sridharan, 2008). The strained relations between these countries have swallowed up two approaching SAARC Summits 1992 and 2005 respectively (Baral, 1988). Similarly, the 1989 SAARC Summit had met the same fate by Sri Lankan allegation over Indian interference in her internal affair (Ahmad, 2017). As a commentator puts: "SAARC will be less responsive to regional cooperation or a more balanced interdependence until the intensifying and persistent conflict continues to dominate the relations of South Asian State" (Mukerjee, 1995). The discussion of conflicts in the SAARC region suggests two important dimensions. The foremost is the lack of trust and confidence in the SAARC members. Another aspect is, this trust deficits create misunderstanding on the part of small states about the big one and in the big one about the smaller ones. At this very point one can consider South Asia as the most complex region in the established text and context of regionalism.

For the success of SAARC, the friendly relations between the two major powers i.e. India and Pakistan are of paramount importance. There is a consensus among the scholars of international relations that Indo-Pakistan tense relations have contributed to ineffectiveness of SAARC. India's strained relations with SRCs including Pakistan severely undermined the process of South Asian regionalism that is also clear from the frequent postponement of SAARC summits. The summits give an important opportunity to leaders of SACs to meet on regular basis to discuss the bilateral and regional issues and political problems directly in a frank manner, free of bureaucratic hurdles at sidelines meetings. Such meetings help remove misunderstandings, mistrust, and irritants in bilateral relations and to reach to prompt decisions at the highest level. However, this forum suffered badly due to bilateral disputes and political problems of the member countries, India's tense relations with its neighbours that caused frequent cancellation

of summit meetings since start of SAARC in 1985 (Ahmad, 2017). The charter of SAARC provides that the Heads of State or Government would meet once every approaching year, but in the thirty-two years' history of SAARC only eighteen summits were held. Postponement of summits per schedule has been attributed to India's tense tensions with Sri Lanka (1987-1991), Bangladesh (1992 and 2005) and Pakistan (1994-1996, 1999-2003 and 2016-17). The expected nineteenth summit in Islamabad in 2016 became the last victim of Indo-Pakistan tension that reinforced the impression that strained bilateral relations of these two states pose the most serious challenge to growth of regional cooperation process within the framework of SAARC (Ahmad, 2017).

4.3. Multi-Track Diplomacy as Tools of Conflicts Management

Conflict resolution in regional organizations, rely upon conflict management which means how a conflict is dealt with or is controlled and its devastating effects are delimited. Further, it is a formal way to bring or support peace in critical circumstances. Conflict Management is the combination of three elements, namely: prevention, containment, and termination (Idrees & Ayaz, 2015). Conflict prevention means avoidance of conflict by ensuring that no complex situation appears that could create a conflict. Containment requires that an evil should be nipped in the bud. It means that conflict should be controlled so that it would not spread (escalate) or to limit its effects. Conflict resolution is complicated process and is said to be extremely difficult, it involves both settlement and resolution of conflicts. It aims at complete elimination and eradication of conflict and active involvement of track-I diplomacy i.e. the officially sponsored diplomacy or active dialogue process between governments. It is said that if a RIGO becomes successful in achieving the first one i.e. prevention of violent conflicts will be considered effective. As for as other RIGOs are concerned, ASEAN has been successful in conflict management, at least in resorting to peaceful measures by renouncing the use of force in conflicting situations. Unfortunately, SAARC is missing any such conflict management mechanism which portrays the lack of commitment on the part of SACs.

Since SAARC does not set up any formal mechanism for conflict management in South Asia, SACs rely on bilateral dialogue process which seldom gives fruits. The India-Pakistan dialogue (peace) process bore no fruits for majority of the times and has been prone to be sabotaged by unwanted bullets from the blue, e.g. the Mombay attacks or Samjhota Express incident. It gave rise to the situation which Moonis Ahmar analysed as: "Lack of political will within Indian and Pakistani regime to ameliorate bilateral ties on the basis of equality and peaceful coexistence exacerbated historical cleavages and political and religious mistrust between the two countries" (Malik, 2013). The SRCs from the very start of SAARC were of the view that regional cooperation in conflict-ridden South Asia would not be possible unless the organization set ups a mechanism to discuss and help resolve bilateral disputes and political problems of the member states. However, India was opposed to this idea and on its insistence, it was provided in the SAARC charter that contentious issues and political problems would be excluded from discussion at meetings of all levels. SRCs repeatedly highlight this point and even suggested to amend the SAARC charter to make it more relevant to the regional needs, particularly in the context of conflict management but to no avail.

Meanwhile, the bilateral diplomatic channels seem useless which shows the failure of track-I diplomacy within SAARC and outside. For instance, all efforts of the Nawaz Sharif government to revive bilateral dialogue process and normalize bilateral ties of both countries failed because of hard-line elements in establishment of both states, and jingoistic posture by

Indian leadership under prime minister Narendra Modi. Due to the failure of track-I channel, there is a need to rely on track-II diplomacy or most commonly the unofficial channels which work as energy corridor and pave the way for official diplomatic track-I channels. This includes religious diplomacy, cricket diplomacy, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges. The improved contacts between businessmen, industrialists, academicians, researchers, journalists, parliamentarians, human rights activists and other professionals and enhanced exchanges of students, artists, singers, and sportsmen etc. can help build the bridges between regional countries and improve mutual understanding, trust, and friendliness.

Track-II diplomacy could be beneficial for revamping the dead dialogue process between India and Pakistan. In the past, there were success stories of track II diplomacy that were brought into action by third party. For example, the Neemrana dialogue process was started by the US Information Agency (USIS) in Rajasthan, India and it found serious issues for discussion including Kashmir issue. In the nineties, Pakistan based magazine and Newspapers organized one-time regional conference on strategic issues. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation gathered the regional scholars and was successful at last in organizing a major Kashmir Conference in 1994. Workshops and seminar on Kashmir are held in Washington DC by US Institute of Peace. If the track-II efforts cannot success, there also exist other options, such as track-III and Multi-Track diplomacy that involves people from different occupations. Maulana Fazalur Rehman of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) has interestingly been following the Multi-Track diplomacy by visiting India and stressing the importance of peace (Idrees & Ayaz, 2015). All the tracks of diplomacy when started, properly channelled, and organized can bring success, particularly for Pakistan and India and to the entire South Asian region.

In fact, India always suggested that SACs must pursue track-III channel diplomacy to create mutual trust, understanding and friendliness among SAARC members. It also emphasized the importance of CBMs in overcoming the bilateral problems of SACs. However, the time has shown that such moves have not been so successful as it is clear from Indo-Pakistan ties. The diplomatic channels are important bargaining tools that work in the side-line of SAARC meetings for improvising the bilateral relations between and among SACs. The South Asian leaders in a soft narrative stress the inclusion of bilateral issues in SAARC agenda because the side-line channels can be fruitful only when SAARC starts focusing on contentious issues in its regular meetings. Therefore, there is a growing awareness among national leaders, policy makers and intelligentsia, among SRCs regarding inclusion of bilateral problem and contentious issues in SAARC deliberations. Pakistan offered recommendations for creating a mechanism of conflict resolution within SAARC. Even sometimes the delegations of other SRCs raise bilateral issues in the SAARC meetings. For example, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka on various occasions voiced their concerns and position on their political problems with India in SAARC meetings. Sri Lanka expressed its resentment over the Indian unilateral air-dropped relief supply in the beleaguered Jaffna province in the year 1987 (Gopal, 1996).

The desire for inclusion of bilateral issues in SAARC agenda has been classic routine of the member countries, yet India undermines all such considerations in her own regional interests. The Sri Lankan foreign minister once in a grumble voice suggested the evaluation of new mechanism where there would be secret foreign ministerial level meetings; where issues between the members would be discussed. SAARC must not end up as deaf, dumb, and blind association (Gopal, 1996). Pakistan, Maldives, and Nepal in a one-voice demanded SAARC the discussion of bilateral issues at the forum if it had to resolve the unsettled disputes in the region. It is in this background that scholars have also suggested SAARC to revise or amend

its charter. For instance, Dixit (2001) proposed to expand the agenda for regional cooperation and to include issues of collective security while the reviewing SAARC charter enabling members to discuss “all political, economic and territorial issues”. According to Gooneratne (2007), SACs were engaged in security cooperation in other RIGOs, such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Thus, they could learn to cooperate and formulate apparatus to discuss security related issues at SAARC forum. Naik (1999) stressed “a South Asian Security Forum” should be set up to discuss political and security related issues.

5. Conclusion

The main problem with SAARC is that its mandate excludes bilateral contentious issues from its agenda. There is great divide in the opinion about the inclusion or exclusion of conflicting issues in the SAARC agenda. The political circles and analysts of SAARC recommend for a fast and steady solution to the regional disputes while others recommend side-lining the regional disputes for the success of the organization. An in-depth analysis of different theories and practices of conflict management as well as the study of the organization and functioning of SAARC, one may easily realize that such disputes have often disturbed the routine business of the organization. The procedure can be best set up by resorting to the widely accepted practices of ‘track diplomacy.’ There is also a need of established norms of conflicts prevention to be adopted by all the member states. The core states (India and Pakistan) need to have a serious look at their attitudes. Their positions demand more active roles from them for the success of SAARC. More importantly, SAARC must devise mechanism for discussion of regional security matters, bilateral disputes, political problems, and contentious issues to make a fresh start for its durable success.

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