

Traditional SAARC, modern Southasia August 2008

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The SAARC process is currently caught between two forces. One emerges from the urge to define the nation state; the other is a product of globalisation, which contains natural market integration and regular civil-society interactions. The former can be considered the traditional force, while the latter can be seen as a more modern force. Currently, the SAARC process is still more influenced by the traditional forces, while the organisation is only slowly coming to terms with the modern forces. However, it is the dynamic of these two forces that will ultimately determine the destiny of the SAARC process.



The traditional force on SAARC is the one regarding the building of a nation state by individual countries after long years of colonial rule, or after suppression by various rulers, or after conflicts with neighbours. At a time when the nation states are themselves still in the process of being formed in the region, the notion of a supranational region seems novel and contradictory. Strengthening SAARC has thus been a failure because most nation states themselves are somewhat failures.

The modern forces are characterised by natural market integration. This process is strengthened through the economic growth and development in the region, with the lead being taken by India. The recent growth in services in Southasia, particularly in India, is the pillar to improve economic integration in the region. As wages in the services-export industry in India rise, some of these activities are relocating to the other Southasian countries. Common cultures, similar institutions, short distances and related factors reduce costs and risks for a 'first mover' to a new country, and its success subsequently provides comfort and encouragement to other investors. This is essentially the spill-over effect of rapid development. Thus, a 'flying geese' pattern of growth is gradually emerging in Southasia, based on service exports and with India as the leader. For this reason, SAARC faces pressure from the private sector, to remove barriers to allow market integration.

Southasian academia and professionals are, meanwhile, meeting quite regularly. The so-

called 'track two' activities (which include the business sector) are on-going, irrespective of political problems in the region. That there is a desire to come together among Southasian professionals was seen during the stasis in SAARC between 1999 and 2001. Although official SAARC activities were dormant during this period, SAARC-affiliated associations of cardiologist, architects, town planners, election commissioners, lawyers and the like engaged in regular meetings – so much so that there were actually more per year during that period than had been taking place under 'normal' circumstances. This clearly shows the desire among professionals to interact with one another, and to be in close touch across the boundaries.

Along these lines, it is often said that both the private sector and the academia and professionals of Southasia are far ahead of the region's governments in terms integration. Compared to ASEAN and other developing regions, Southasia can be seen as having some of the best human resources; ASEAN, for instance, thus far has not produced any Nobel Prize-winner besides Aung Sang Suu Kyi, while more than five have come from Southasia. Yet the ideas that are generated at academic and private-sector interactions hardly make an impact on the SAARC process. Why is this the case?

Soft project

The official SAARC process is basically a Foreign Ministry-driven project. Due to the influence of regional politics based on the nation state, the foreign ministries prefer to focus on 'soft' issues that will go over well in all other countries. Such issues include, for example, building new institutions for SAARC (such as the SAARC Documentation Centre), or passing new conventions on, for instance, combating 'terrorism'. In this way, these soft issues and housekeeping matters overload the SAARC agenda prior to each SAARC Summit.

Many of these soft projects have not brought tangible benefits for the people of the region. If an assessment is made on some of the regional centres in SAARC – the Agriculture Information Centre, the Meteorological Centre, the Human Resource Development Centre – their contributions to improving living standards of the general public will be seen to be insignificant. Similar are the many SAARC conventions, which are basically confined to paper.

The 'second track' documents are usually handed over to government officials as any other report. However, since these papers are not initiated by the official SAARC process, they are treated as an outside opinion, with little relevance for the decision-making process. There is reluctance on the part of the foreign ministries to overload the SAARC agenda with another set of policy proposals from the 'second track', when the official agenda is already bulging at the seams. But intense interactions between the region's academics and professionals, as well as natural market integration, are strong forces, which will automatically exert enough pressure for barriers to come down for more regional integration. Moreover, India is increasingly seen as an opportunity rather than a threat by the rest of the region. This is why, of late, some of these ideas have been gradually finding a place in SAARC deliberations.

The SAARC process is too slow, and it requires a complete overhaul. The Group of Eminent Persons' report of 1998 made a number of valuable suggestions to make SAARC more effective and work for its people. Unfortunately, the group's report has never been seriously discussed. In the current context, there is no need for another eminent persons' report, as numerous studies have already shown where the major problems lie. What is required is to find a mechanism within the foreign ministries of the region, and at the SAARC Secretariat, to absorb the ideas being generated by the 'second track'. This will allow the modern forces to overcome the traditional forces, and will help SAARC to move forward.

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