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South Asian Regional Integration – Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

South Asian regional integration is seemingly confronting many challenges. The aim of this paper is to identify those challenges and also look for prospects. Although regional integration in South Asia has adopted a kind of institutionalization, it is yet to deliver any concrete outcomes. High-politics and the not-so-conducive regional economic structures hinder any effectual culmination. However, constructivism, as a theory, is given due credence in this paper when looking for future prospects. The paper highlights the issues, and attempts to offer certain policy directions by analyzing the challenges and identifying the prospects in the on-going integration/cooperation process.

Introduction

South Asia is a politically volatile and economically underdeveloped region of the world. It has countries with different developmental and economic bases; it is, however, generally culturally and socially homogeneous. All the countries, by and large, follow democratic pluralism. It has a common history, but political division is causing constraints in deepening intra-regional homogeneity. It has not had to encounter a common threat or a war as a region that could have shaken its members to come closer together. Thus said, generally the desire to have a peaceful, stable, and communitarian surrounding is the rationale for the existence of many regional bodies. European integration, as a case in point, is a glaring example. It was on the heels of the ruins of Nazi Germany that the European Union (EU) was created. It was the United States that wanted reconciliation and reconstruction in post-Second World War Europe. It thus launched the Marshall Plan, a gigantic logistics, reconstruction, and reintegration effort. It worked marvels leading to 'reconciliation between former

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enemies, France and Germany' (Milward, 2000: 10). Deutsch finds community building in Europe coincided with American strategic interests 'leading to military alliances with west European countries'. He also identifies 'active cooperation' between the United States and Western Europe and cultural familiarities between western societies that contributed to such phenomenon (Milward, 2000: 10). There were also economic imperatives within the EU countries as evident from the formation of the 'European Coal, Iron and Steel Community' in the 1950s. The Community even resolved to form a kind of political union someday. South Asia, as it started its integration process in the early 1980s, presumably did consider the rationale from economic, social and cultural perspectives since it is home to some of the least developed countries. Bilateral contentious issues, however, have been totally kept out of its ambit right from its beginning.

Regional integration can be said to be a distinct policy area of a kind of inter-state relation – not compromising vital national interests – where a portion of state sovereignty may get watered down for the sake of the common good. It also covers the game of power politics – but may be in a subtle way. Presently, the subtle power game is visible between the German–French condominium and the United Kingdom in the context of the European Union, and China, and Japan and USA in the case of East Asia. China and the United States are creeping forward in such subtle politics in South Asia as well. They have, in fact, got overtly involved in the regionalization process in South Asia. As always, distinct nation-states are in a state of competition for survival and protecting national interests in this anarchical world order. So the continuity or existence of regionally based organizations such as the EU or the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is difficult to explain when judged in the context of overriding national values and interests. Anyway regional integration is an on-going process and is providing tangible results.

What is distinctive are the overriding national interests which are definitely the greatest stumbling blocks to the integration process. Nation-states are still vibrant entities, notwithstanding the fact that non-state-actors are a threat to their vibrancy and even, at times, to their integrity. Community building, which is an important desired end-state of regionalism, may not be able to overtake the state-building process. The present financial recession in different countries in Europe is causing hiccups to the regional integration process. In South Asia, geopolitical tensions, mainly between India and Pakistan, are causing bottlenecks to the process.

So there is a danger, taking the European model as a case in point, of taking the integration process too deep and too far; some even tend to take it the extent of a political union. Without common political parties, political union is a difficult proposition. Gary Mark evaluates that, 'the current crisis (of the EU) reveals how difficult it is to bring normatively diverse communities under a single jurisdictional roof. How can a large polity endure if it combines states with populations having parochial identities? Will it break apart, or be eroded by resurgent nationalism?' (Marks, 2012: 17). It speaks

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volumes that the system has seemingly got unwieldy. Be that as it may, its progress, thus far, towards the goal of integration is impressive.

The EU case has, on the other hand, also posed a great challenge to the protagonists of regionalism; South Asia needs to be aware of such an alarm bell. The EU model, being closed regionalism, as opposed to open regionalism as in Southeast Asia, may not be fully relevant from a comparative perspective. The EU is more *de jure* integration while it is more *de facto* in East Asia. South Asia may aim for a more functional approach – more in the direction of cooperation. Thus said, regionalism in South Asia – its conceptual framework is shown in later paragraphs – is examined in the paper. South Asia, in a traditional sense, can be called one geopolitical or even one geographical entity. Each region has its own unique dynamics and power relations. So in drawing parallels with other models may be viewed more as looking for inspiration rather than an imitation. It comes about because the demand generates from within the region.

It can be formulated that South Asia – beleaguered as it is by high-politics and a not-so-conducive economic structure – is not necessarily a classic case-study for regional integration. Nonetheless, it still shows potential to reach some kind of regional integration or cooperation. It may not think of developing itself as a supra-state. The colonial legacy, subsequent political divisions, and Cold War bi-polarity are mainly impacting its integration process. The background and the South Asian geographical and geopolitical canvas is provided in later paragraphs.

The paper highlights the obvious challenges and likely prospects of regional integration or cooperation in South Asia. Constructivism would be the main argument of the paper; however, it would be reinforced by other relevant theories. An attempt has been made to link theories with the hard realities existing in South Asia. The paper provides reflections to indicate certain policy directions.

Conceptual framework

To start with, the distinction between regionalism and regionalization may be put in context. Regionalism implies 'a degree of intentionality as states and other actors engage in an essentially political process of collaboration. Regionalization, by contrast, is a less self-conscious and coherent process, which is primarily driven by the private sector' (Beeson, 2007: 5). Regionalism is more 'policy-driven, formal, and top-down and regionalization is more societal-driven, informal, and a bottom-up process'. Both may be taken as synonymous terms; however, regionalism is the generic referent for both (Dent, 2008:7). Regionalization is more relevant to East Asia than to Europe. Japan, China, and South Korean conglomerates might have greatly contributed to the process of regionalization. Sadly enough, this is almost absent in South Asia. Geoffrey Blainely, while talking about 'tyranny of distance', has concluded 'the sheer difficulty of interacting over long distances placed fundamental constraints on the nature of possible relationships'. But with the advent of more reliable communication and transport one tends 'to claim that we now inhabit a deeply integrated world in which global, rather than national or regional processes will predominate' (Beeson, 2007: 3). South Asia does

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not suffer from the 'tyranny of distance', but its internal connectivity is fragile. Thus said, HE and Inoguchi (2011: 166) provide a rather philosophical and an inspirational idea about regionalism:

> Regionalism is an inspirational enterprise in human history. As well as being inspirational, we can say that it is quietly revolutionary since it involves the reorganization of political, economic, cultural, and social lives along the lines of an imagined region rather than according to the standard political unit of the nation-state.

However, as we see in East Asia, increasingly more functional ways to cooperate on a regional basis are being looked at. Acharya and Layug (2012) argue that ASEAN provides normative regionalism that puts a 'premium on ideational variables such as ideas, norms, and identity more than the materialist variables such as relative gains and balance-of-power'. Having said this, complete seclusion of extra-regional powers, ostensibly to play the balance-of-power game, is a difficult proposition. Herein come subtle power politics, where ASEAN centrality is coming under increasing strain. Acharya and Layug (2012) conclude that although ASEAN has normative influence, to transform that into power *per se* is subject to question and interpretation.

Despite the contradictions, and at times, conflicting interests prevailing in South Asia, there are reasons to be optimistic, as the social constructivists hypothesize that ideas and beliefs ultimately tend to trigger any project. Realistic ideation is always a difficult exercise. '[T]ransformative or generative processes such as deliberation, persuasion and socialization can lead to identity transformation and preferences Katzenstein and Sil (2004: 9)'. Such transformation in South Asia is still fraught with challenges and uncertainties. South Asia has the legacy of a common cultural identity, such as language, social traditions, music, art, etc. Political division has put a kind of damper on deeper socialization. This can, however, always be revived through better people-to-people contacts and elite interactions. 'It also gives credence to the theory that whatever the level of hostility, dialogue and personal contact always remain important' (Fatemi *et al.*, 2004: 83). South Asians broadly follow the Asian culture of dialogue, consultation, and social-bondage. But that culture is not providing the desired dividends due to political divisions and overriding national interests, mostly nationalistic security oriented. However, of late, there are signs of better inter-connectivity, both physical and psychological, in the region.

South Asia may build on a culture of consultation and dialogue to take regional integration or cooperation forward. The habit of consultation and mediation is deeply ingrained as a value-system, even in settling small-scale village disputes across all nations of South Asia. In South Asia, ideas, beliefs, and proposals, at least, have taken a kind of formal concrete shape sufficient to call it a kind of regional cooperation, notwithstanding if it is only on the periphery. It is, however, taking decades to become more formalized, which was true for the EU and ASEAN. Community-building is a formidable task even for East Asia. 'Shared community is the essence of regionalism' that has three components: '(1) social networks that bridge national boundaries; (2) strategic

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thinking that recognizes common security interests; and (3) a regional identity capable of overriding national identities on matters of shared significance' (Rozman, 2012: 143). South Asia can easily revive the social networks that can bridge national boundaries. It already has a unique regional identity, a common history, and almost similar cultures. Even in matters of food, dress-codes, wedding-ceremonies, musical soirees, paintings, harvesting-patterns, festivals, literature, they have many commonalities. In South Asia, it is amazing to see the highest number of television viewers whenever and wherever there are cricket matches between India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. However, it tends to stumble on matters of common security.

Katzenstein (2000: 354) argues regions are 'more than the flow of goods and people across physical space ... Regions are also cognitive and social constructs that are rooted in political practice.' He further posits that regions can be 'peaceful and rich, or war-prone and poor'. Jayasuriya (1994: 412) defines regionalism in the following way: it 'is a set of cognitive practices shaped by language and political discourse, which through the creation of concepts, metaphors, analogies, determine how the region is defined; these serve to define the actors who are included (and excluded) within the region and thereby enable the emergence of a regional entity and identity'. Friedberg (2005: 35), while conceptualizing constructivism, argues that the constant interactions of the members in any international institution 'can actually change the underlying beliefs, interests, and mental categories of those who participate in them'.

To put the concept into a comparative framework, neo-liberals posit that regional institutions 'provide information, lower transaction costs, and frown upon verbal cheating'. Neo-liberals argue that such processes 'enhance predictability and credibility which, in turn, make co-operation among self-interested states possible' (Khong, 2004: 201). Friedberg's (2005: 14) observation, while evaluating the participation of great powers in the integration process, seems relevant here: 'The growth of international institutions in Asia and the expansion of both US and Chinese participation in them are drawing the United States and China into a thickening web of ties that liberal optimists believe will promote contact, communication and, over time, greater mutual understanding and even trust, or at the very least, a reduced likelihood of gross misperception.' He, while, again conceptualizing liberal optimism, posits that international institutions 'contribute to communication between states, reduce uncertainty, and enhance governments' capacity to make more credible and binding commitments' Friedberg (2005: 13). There is, of late, a silver lining in South Asia where both the major powers tend to come forward. There is lot of substance in Friedberg's earlier statement, but Rozman (2012: 152) argues a little differently. For example, China is 'not succeeding in establishing social networks conducive to regionalism' and its strategic thinking is exacerbating differences rather than contributing to cooperation. He further argues that there is going to be a stand-off 'between the Sino-centric ideal and the trans-Pacific ideal with ASEAN-led cautious steps navigating between them'. South Asia is yet to fall into such a stand-off. However, their geopolitical involvement is gradually becoming visible and competitive in South Asia as well.

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Neo-liberal institutionalism prescribes that states need to cooperate to make the international system work in a non-anarchical manner. 'States need to cooperate to both redress market failure at the international level and jointly provide the public goods required for the international economic system' (Dent, 2008: 31). In the formation of regional organizations, group dynamics trigger them to become more vibrant than the sum of the member states. Without dynamism and enough impetus for integration, regional organizations would not be able to make any reckonable impact. Managing the complex interdependence among the sets of closely connected nation-states, usually within the same region, is the crux of neo-liberal institutionalization. The South Asian region is a classic example of geographically and culturally closely connected nation-states. Although there are many religions being practiced in South Asia, its culture of syncretism, of good-neighbourliness, of consultation and mediation are centuries-old. However, it got a jolt with the advent of colonization and later with political division and Cold War bipolarity. At this point in time, reinvigorating group-dynamics seems a great challenge for South Asia.

Given these imperatives, smaller countries may want to advance their countries' position, status, and influence – presumably originating from an insecurity complex, both human and physical, within the South Asian regional framework in particular and within the world at large. The 'English School' of international relations and hegemonic stability theory (HST) recognizes the primacy of nation-states, and also accepts the proposition that nation-states form the basic units of international society to solve common problems; and that state behaviour is subject to the rules, norms, values, and institutions of international society (Dent, 2008: 29). A regional hegemon presumably ensures stability in a region. HST, however, is not that applicable in South Asia because of its bi-polar power structure, which became embedded during the Cold War. India, being the central player in the region, not only shares common borders but also ethnic, religious, and cultural similarities with all its neighbours (Rizvi, 1986: 135). South Asians may exploit this centrality. Given such a dispensation, smaller states of South Asia desperately need to take advantage of institutional frameworks. But regional or even extra-regional geopolitics or strategic competition presumably make it difficult to translate such an urge into action. And such politics are deeply rooted in their history.

An outline of geography and history of South Asia

From geographical and historical perspectives, South Asia can be branded as one entity even today – the long period of colonization deeply shook its composure and led to much mistrust because of the political divisions. The region is also beset with ethnic and religious divisions, and economic disparities. The political divisions resulted in much disharmony in the social and economic fabric of the region. Religious sentiments were overplayed between India and Pakistan, especially during partition in 1947. But overall syncretism is, more or less, always ingrained in the body politic of the region. However, South Asia does not totally have the advantages found in Europe which are characterized by its 'democratic systems, and the rule of law, a relatively high level

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of economic and social development and a common economic ideology (capitalism)' (Murray, 2011: 318).

From geographical perspective, South Asia is crisscrossed by many mighty rivers. Most of the rivers generally originate in the Himalayas and after meandering through different parts of the region join different seas in the Indian Ocean. This is a natural course that has been going on ever since the dawn of human civilization, but political division in the region has led to consequences that presumably gave rise to geopolitical tensions. Geopolitical tensions are basically the consequences over the sharing of the waters of the common international rivers that pass through different political entities of South Asia.

Its eastern part, predominantly covered by the Gangetic plain, once used to be called a land of 'milk and honey' as it produced an abundance of varieties of cereals. It is generally believed this region was one of the richest in the world between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. This is also true in the case of the Punjab, in the western part, which is watered by some of the important rivers. These areas could be called the granaries of the region. The region is also endowed with many natural resources such as gas, water, oil, minerals, fisheries, and still many untapped resources in the vast Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean acts as a route for the flow of these resources, moving from the Persian Gulf to the Western Pacific. Countries such as the USA, China, and Japan are critically dependent on this strategic route for energy supply. This has given rise to the 'string of pearls' policy by China, as part of an energy diversionary strategy. This is responded to by India in the form of a counter 'string of pearls' policy in its off-shore islands in the Indian Ocean. Here some other smaller nations of South Asia, especially Pakistan, are also getting entangled in this polarization process.

In the final analysis, the upshot of colonialism resulted in the economic pauperization of the region. It has also given rise to ethnic and religious tensions in the region. The two predominant religious groups, i.e. Hindus and Muslims, went for separate homelands based on religious identities. Efforts were made to keep one confederated South Asia in the 1940s, but it did not work out. It resulted in unprecedented riots and the displacement of a huge population across the political divisions. However, with the trend for globalization, and regionalism, and interdependence in economies, there is a trend for more liberalization and free trade, and interaction among peoples across political boundaries. But deep-seated mistrust and suspicion have put a damper on becoming closer emotionally, or even economically. Regional integration even only in economic collaboration is a tedious and challenging process, when high-politics is pronounced in South Asia.

High politics

Geopolitics or high politics in South Asia is a reality that needs to be duly recognized. This high politics is especially relevant in the inter-state relations between Pakistan and India. It resulted in many wars being fought and skirmishes, and put them into an unending state of an arms race. On the intractable issue of Kashmir, India and

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Pakistan have fought three fully fledged conventional wars, notwithstanding the border skirmishes that occasionally erupt. Both countries have gone nuclear in order to deter each other. There are both maritime and land boundary demarcations, water-sharing, and cross-border terrorism and other organized crimes among the countries of South Asia.

Notwithstanding such high politics, regional integration efforts, along with the multilateral security dialogue, are likely to have a cooling effect on the geopolitical ambitions in a 'business as usual' environment. This is again a difficult proposition. Discussing the EU, Milward (2000: 19) states, 'The conversion away from a primary national allegiance, for which European federalists hoped, has not taken place. National allegiance remains undiminished, but national citizens have developed a strong secondary allegiance during the Community's existence.'

Without compromising national allegiance, smaller nations of South Asia can still champion the cause of regional integration because they feel they are more secure, both physically and economically, in such a dispensation. A glaring example is that the very idea of a South Asian regionalism was mooted by a least developed country, Bangladesh. An insecurity complex might have triggered Bangladesh to moot such a proposition. There might have been American tacit approval for such collaboration, especially when the Soviets had launched an aggression in Afghanistan and there were regime changes such as in India and Bangladesh. This is also true for ASEAN which originally grew up as a non-communist entity. Thus said, even after the establishment of such an institution, Roberts (2010) argues 'state weakness significantly impedes the effectiveness of ASEAN, together with the prospects for the establishment of the 'ASEAN Community'. State weakness is even more glaring in South Asia.

Without confronting high politics upfront or minimizing its negative impact, economic regionalism in South Asia may be a difficult proposition. Dent (2008: 24), makes an emphatic statement, 'Regional security arrangement can bring greater stability and trust amongst a regional community of nations, without which economic regionalism may be difficult to achieve.' South Asia is far from creating a stable regional security architecture. Although India is seen to be a dominant power in South Asia, it is as yet not capable of playing the role of a leader 'in a consistent and comprehensive manner'. It, however, plays the roles of custodian and protector, although not too decisively, 'even when faced with security issues primarily focused on some of the smaller members of RSC (Regional Security Complex)'. It is argued that although the region appears uni-polar, 'India's impact is limited because of its failure to play leadership and custodianship roles' (Steward-Ingersoll and Frazier, 2010: 51). This generates trends towards bi-polarity that detracts from regional integration. The upshot of this bi-polarity negates India's propensity to strengthen 'institutional cooperation because it anticipated suspicion and/or resistance from its neighbours particularly Pakistan' (Dixit, 2001: 126). Having observed so, there are positive trends as demonstrated recently by India revisiting its South Asian neighbourhood policy. It is constructively engaging with all the actors, including Pakistan. Kashmir is generally

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quiet now and many confidence-building measures, as agreed by both powers in the SAARC Summit in Islamabad in 2004, have been launched which make the environment conducive for settling outstanding problems. Both the powers agreed, on the sidelines of the Summit, to resume the 'Composite Dialogue' to address all the contentious bilateral issues.

Over and above traditional security, South Asia is greatly plagued by a preponderance of non-traditional security challenges as well. Challenges such as human trafficking, natural disasters, cross-border and internal migration, climate change, drug trafficking, food scarcity, gun running, cross-border terrorism, insurgency, etc. greatly undermine the stability of an integrated state. However, such transnational challenges should have brought the South Asians closer together for regional cooperation – the common threat of communism presumably brought some of the Southeast Asian countries together. Common 'shared interests and purposes among nations create and maintain demand for interdependence and cooperation' (Rais, 2001: 219) and contribute to formulating a common security policy against the 'other'. But that 'other' appears elusive in South Asia.

Four of the world's top peacekeepers, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and India, are from South Asia. Although they take care of others' peace, even in the remote corners of Africa, they are themselves crippled by organized transnational crimes and inter-state disputes and irritants. To confront such crimes, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has attempted to deal with certain contentious issues such as terrorism and human trafficking. SAARC adopted the Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism in 1987 and an additional protocol to the Convention in 2004 (during Islamabad Summit) that deals with the financing of terrorism. Such acts may be viewed as the manifestation of SAARC's commitment to eliminate terrorism from the region. It has also formulated the SAARC Convention on Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, 2002. As part of the action-plan, a Regional Task Force has been created to monitor and assess the implementation of the Convention. The Convention calls for the 'prevention, interdiction, and suppression of trafficking of women and children for prostitution, and for the repatriation and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking'. More importantly, SAARC has decided to share intelligence on terrorism and other transnational crimes among countries (Millar, 2009: 19). But what is upsetting is that high-politics and inter-state tensions hinder their implementation. Soft-politics can be an option to soften high-politics.

Through soft politics, ASEAN is trying to balance the two great giants, i.e. China and the United States. Both powers are now all-out to exert their influence in East Asia as already indicated. Such polarization is also visible in South Asia. This kind of power politics may also put a damper on the integration effort. The suggestion would be: the proponents of regional integration should attempt to divert their political urge for power – may be by acting as catalysts in this respect – towards regionalism. The positive view of the US is discernible in this official statement, 'The economic future of a more open and integrated South Asia is virtually unlimited, and as an established,

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home-grown institution SAARC is in a unique position to help. The United States, too, is ready to assist' (Blake, 2011).

Here a question may be raised as to whether regional integration is a boon or an impediment for the great powers. Subtle power politics come into play where the stakes of smaller and middle nation-states are involved. 'Great Powers often resist deepening regionalization for fear that it will constrain their power' (HE and Inoguchi, 2011: 169). However, in order to have some kind of clout in South Asia, both China and the United States seem interested in playing a more active role in the integration process. This may have relevance to their geopolitical ambitions. Both the powers have been granted observer status and China has expressed its interest to be a full member of SAARC or may be something such as SAARC+1. Power politics in South Asia may not allow this to happen any time soon, as happened when including Afghanistan as a full-member of SAARC in 2005. Pakistan turned the tables by making Afghanistan's admission conditional on China being granted observer status. As part of great-power politics, India counterbalanced China's observer status by providing observer status to Japan, a power 'sharing common concerns about Chinese expansionism'. China's status was further diluted by facilitating, by India, observer status to the United States in 2006 (Scott, 2008: 11). In economic collaboration, there is a great surge, especially between China and India.

Economic perspectives

Security and economy have to be better harmonized in order to move towards a more meaningful integration process. The EU and ASEAN have made exemplary strides in economic cooperation and the resultant cooling effect has had an impact in resolving many age-old inter-state conflicts. There are still challenges. ASEAN is going slow and steady but indirect fall-out still exists.

Economically, South Asia is inherently handicapped, since it is home to nearly 1.5 billion people of which 43% are the world's poor. On the other hand, it has a little over 2% of the world's GDP as against 25% of the world's population (Khan and Larik, 2007: 21–2). Intra-regional trade in South Asia is just above 6% (Rahman, 2011) compared to 65% plus for the EU and 24% within ASEAN (HE and Inoguchi, 2011: 170). Interestingly, intra-regional trade in South Asia was 19% in 1948, immediately after the colonial era.

Added to it, South Asia probably rates one of the highest in terms of human deprivation. It is overwhelmed with poverty, illiteracy, and low life expectancy. One-third of South Asians live below the poverty line and the looming climate-induced maladies may exacerbate the scenario leading to massive migration of population (Rahman, 2011).[1] Taking US$ 1.25 a day as a poverty line, in 2005 there were 596

[1] The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) made a forecast that if current trends continue, 80% of the Himalayan glaciers will be gone in 30 years inducing many water-related hazards, such as glacier lake outburst floods, and water stress ... Between 120 million to 1.2 billion people will experience increasing water stress by the 2020s in South and Southeast Asia' (Rahman, 2011).

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million people living below the poverty line in South Asia, home to 1,123 million people (HDR, 2009). Yet South Asia is the most militarized region, because of high-politics, in the developing world 'with the highest percentage of GDP going to military expenditure'. Notwithstanding such depressing statistics, the most encouraging news is that the GDP of South Asian economies has grown at 6% since 1990s, and at almost 7%, with India leading, in the five years starting 2002–03 (Kumar and Singh: 2009: 3). In 2010, South Asia had a vibrant 9.1% growth rate. In 2011, however, it declined to 6.6% (Global Economic Prospects: Uncertainties and Vulnerabilities, 2012). South Asians need to take advantage of this spectacular growth to increase intra-regional trade.

The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), is, however, facing a major hurdle because of rivalry between India and Pakistan over tariff concessions. SAFTA is still far from satisfactory in terms of liberalization, and it has narrow coverage. Noreen (2012) apprehends that 'a proposal that has already been delayed will need genuine political cooperation for tariff reduction to reach to its desired goal. Its success also hinges on the resolution of conflicts between South Asian states.' Political will gets deflected when there is lack of trade complementarities in the South Asian bilateral trade structure. SAFTA member countries' comparative advantages are almost identical and most of them have narrow baskets of commodities. South Asian countries are 'competitive rather than complementary in their production structures'. They compete with 'one another for a market share', and tend to import from developed countries rather than neighbours 'for reasons of quality and credit facility' (Paranjpe, 2002: 347). In most of the South Asian countries, with the exception of probably India and Sri Lanka, 'there is inefficient and uncompetitive production structure, high barriers to investment, large scale informal-illegal border trade ... and poor cross-border trading infrastructures' (Moinuddin, 2008: 142). However there are gradual, though slow, signs of improvement in some of the problem areas.

According to 'gravity' models of international trade and natural block arguments, neighbouring countries normally engage in inter-state trade; and geographical proximity works as a facilitator, as there is no 'tyranny of distance'. However, Prabir De (2005: 268) argues that since most of the South Asian countries enjoy 'similar socio-economic characteristics in terms of high population growth, high land-man ratio, high poverty, and low international competitiveness' they should synergize these complementarities in areas of 'industry, services, trade and technology', provided the countries concerned put into place developed and modern infrastructure facilities leading to connectivity. This will contribute to reduce transaction costs, increase intra-regional trade, and even make for access to international trade. Srinivasan (quoted in Kumar and Singh, 2009: 5), one of the earliest studies, observed, using a gravity model, that Free Trade Areas (FTAs) in South Asia were likely to contribute to a spurt in trade – by 8.9 times in Bangladesh, 9.5 in Pakistan, 12.8 in India, 10.3 in Sri Lanka, and 17.2 in Nepal. Thus said, the constraining factor is again the historical animosities existing between India and Pakistan, the largest economies of the region. Bilateral trade between

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these two countries is considerably lower than two other identical economies such as Bangladesh and India (Moinuddin, 2008: 141). Indian conglomerates are investing more in Singapore, Vietnam, and even in EU countries than in South Asia. During 2009–10, India's investment in South Asia fell, because it was investing more in developed countries (Kanungo, 2012: 17). Be that as it may, India's investment in South Asia is considerable compared to Pakistan. In Nepal and Bhutan, India's investment is significant, and in Sri Lanka India is the largest investor. The India–Sri-Lankan Free-trade Agreement – operational in 2000 – is providing a win–win outcome for both the countries. Indian–Sri Lankan trade has increased substantially, with 86% of Sri Lankan exports going to India and 35.5% of India's going to Sri Lanka (Kumar and Singh, 2009: 12). The Sri-Lanka–India FTA has boosted foreign direct investment (FDI), mostly in the field of construction, transport, and logistics, coming from Sri-Lanka to India (Kanungo, 2012: 19).

South Asia's tariff range is relatively high, though there are discernible trends to lower tariffs. Until recently, absence of trade preferences might not have been the reason for a low level of intra-regional trade, but the absence of liberal trade policies. Thus said, like ASEAN, SAARC countries may undertake bold, comprehensive liberalization on a non-discriminatory basis. One of the objectives of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industries is 'To encourage Member Countries to accord preferential terms of trade to each other and finally strive towards the gradual realization of the SAARC Economic and Monetary Union.' It is expected that the Chamber will become more assertive in realizing its objectives.

On an optimistic note, in the last SAARC Summit, Pakistan announced that it would grant the Most Favored Nation (MNF) treatment to India. Pakistan has also indicated it will gradually provide 'duty-free access to India for virtually all items'. On the other hand, India has withdrawn its earlier opposition to the 'granting a waiver to Pakistan by the EU in the context of EU's proposal to offer duty-free market access to Pakistan for 75 tariff lines of export'. It is, indeed, *quid-pro-quo* between India and Pakistan (Rahman, 2011). Once Pakistan operationalizes the MNF status, it would clear the way for full implementation of the SAFTA protocol. India was granted this status in 1996, but Islamabad did not relent because it accuses India of non-tariff barriers such as in the areas of trade facilitation and customs procedures, limited land transport routes and infrastructure facilities, related bilateral protocols, and standards as imposed by India. There is another hurdle to free trade because of the long sensitive lists with the countries of South Asia. But of late, the good news is that both India and Pakistan have now decided to phase out the sensitive lists gradually. Pakistan agreed in principle to phase them out by 20 December 2012. As of 1 January 2012 Pakistan reduced the items in the list from 1169 to 936 (Keshri, 2012). India has reduced its list for Least Developed Countries (LDC) from 480 items to 25 items. It has reduced the peak tariff rate of 8% for Non-Least-Developed Countries (NLDCs) under SAFTA (Press Information Bureau, 2012) .These are all positive developments, which show trends for gradual elimination of trade and investment barriers, towards a common Customs Union.

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For poverty alleviation, which should be a target area for the Region, SAARC has established an independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). In April 2002, it prepared a 'Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation'. Some of the key areas it wants to address are good governance, secured macro-economic management policies, human development through the adoption of Bhutan's philosophy of promoting 'Gross National Happiness' through equitable socio-economic development, promotion of employment in small and medium enterprises, extending social safety nets, and expanding intra-regional trade and capital flows etc. The 2010 SAARC Summit emphasized deepening of poverty alleviation and called for the mainstreaming of the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) in the national process. Resource mobilization for achieving the goal of SDGs would remain a priority in the 'Decade of Poverty Alleviation (2006–15)' that SAARC has launched. The decision to establish the SAARC Food Bank in 2007 with the primary objective 'to act as a regional food security reserve for the SAARC Member Countries during normal time food shortages and emergencies' is a befitting and timely initiative for the calamity-inducing famines that often devastate South Asia. However its operational efficacy is yet to be assessed.

As another step forward in a similar direction, SAARC Social Charter has been approved in 2004 during the Islamabad Summit. Within 'overall and balanced social development of their peoples', it covers such areas as to take care of the disadvantaged, marginalized, and vulnerable persons and groups, protection of human rights, and poverty alleviation, including 'assured nutritional standards', human resource development and youth mobilization, child and mother care, and reconfirming the implementation of the Convention on Combating the Trafficking of Women and Children for prostitution. All state parties agreed to respect the obligations under the Charter. Siwakoti (2012) observes that the Charter gives high priority to address the concept of human security. It definitely contributes 'In the well-being of the people falling below the poverty line, facing social exclusion, marginalized communities, and vulnerable groups'. However, he also suggests that there should be an appropriate national mechanism to oversee the implementation of the Charter. He also calls for an effective network of civil societies to put pressure on national governments to implement the Charter. In South Asia, a network is emerging. The idea of the People's Union of SAARC, covered in the later paragraphs, bears testimony to the fact.

Reflections

It can be inferred both on the count of geopolitics and geo-economics that South Asia is facing constraints. It is taking time to create a regional atmosphere that includes understanding, trust, and socialization. Again institutional building is as yet far from satisfactory. Inter-state connectivity, when seen at the regional level, is almost non-existent. Some of the countries are racing more towards globalization rather than regionalization. India is on a fast track to assume a globalization role, such as in BRICS (an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China

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and South Africa) and the Strategic Partnership with the US. Hilali (2001: 740) argues, 'Regional politics remain wedded to the notion that India, as a major power, gains more advantages from its relationship with the world as compared to region.' That can be true to any aspiring power trying to assume global role. This does not necessarily preclude India from shouldering greater responsibility to take all other smaller nations of South Asia on board when it wants to assume a leadership role on the world stage. There are visible trends where India is seen to be serious about developing a regional connectivity. A major power in a particular region has the added responsibility to add value and dynamism to the process of regional cooperation or integration. The next power, Pakistan, also has historical responsibility to take the process forward.

To quicken the process in South Asia, India and Pakistan should settle old scores as comprehensively as possible. They should speed up their 'Composite Dialogue', as agreed on the sidelines of the 2004 SAARC Summit, and find some reasonable solution to all bilateral issues, acceptable to all stakeholders. Better confidence-building measures across the line-of-control in the disputed Kashmir region is a welcome gesture. This is a positive sign when looking at implementing such measures to mitigate other sensitive and contentious issues.

Transnational terrorism, of late, shows trends of decreasing. However, there is no reason for complacency, since its potential remains. India's allegations of Pakistan exporting terrorism should be addressed by Pakistan, that is Pakistan should be more vigilant regarding the terrorists' networks working in Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It has to ensure that its home-grown terrorist outfits, do not turn out to be transnational and destabilizing to the regional security. Over and above this, Afghanistan, one of the SAARC countries, has turned out to be another play-ground of geopolitics between India and Pakistan. Here extra-regional powers, especially America, are inextricably involved, which makes the situation extremely delicate. Both India and Pakistan need to tone down their geopolitical ambitions once the Americans withdraw. An agreement may be reached among India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to create a zone of peace, neutrality, and cooperation in that part of the world, something like the *Panchaseel* Agreement reached between China and India in 1954 and ASEAN Agreement on Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Such a spirit may subsequently be extended to the whole of South Asia.

There may be a multilateral approach to solve the outstanding regional problems. Regional connectivity will then take on a meaningful shape. Bilateral contentious issues may not altogether be sidelined while interacting at the collective level. Discussions on these issues may be encouraged, if not handled institutionally. South Asia may think of developing a security mechanism, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), that may at least discuss the security related issues in the sidelines. It may, at the least, work as a confidence-builder. Acharya and Layug (2012), borrowing the idea from Deutch, talks about a 'security community where there would be assurance that the members will not fight with each other, but settle the disputes, if any, by resorting to other means'. South Asia presumably needs to draw inspiration from such a concept.

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Recent formation on the East Asian Summit (EAS) is a game changer for regional cooperation which has brought together all the major powers of the Asia-Pacific, including for the first time Russia and America. ASEAN is believed to remain at centre stage, by fine-tuning its soft politics and attempting to sideline high-politics for most of the regional frameworks in East Asia. Regrettably, however, of late, regional geopolitics seem to constrain ASEAN's centrality. ASEAN failed to issue the customary Joint Communiqué after the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Pnom Pehn in July 2012. The Singapore Foreign Minister regretted it was a blow to ASEAN's credibility that 'it was unable to deal with something that is happening in our neighbourhood and not say something about it'. Cambodian Foreign Minister also regretted that the joint communiqué had 'become hostage of the bilateral issue between the Philippines and China' over the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea (Basilio, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2012). Internal division was clearly visible between the ASEAN countries during the 2012 Summit in Pnom Pehn over the South China issue. Cambodia was for not internationalizing the issue, which was openly challenged by the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Deskar, 2012). Unfortunately, SAARC, as an institution, is far from playing any fine-tuned soft-politics that can deflect high-politics.

The author, in no way, intends to degrade the value that SAARC has already made to the process of regional cooperation/integration. The author is even looking forward to the vision, as articulated by a Group of Eminent Persons (GEP), constituted as per the decision of the 9th Summit of SAARC in 1997, of graduating from a Preferential Trading Arrangement (PTA) to a Free Trade Area (FTA) to a Customs Union (CU) to a Common Market (CM) and on to an Economic Union (EU) in South Asia by 2020. Its reality within the timeframe is highly suspect. Even ASEAN is far from reaching the stage of a Customs Union. For the time being, while the visionary process moves on, South Asia may address more vigorously issues such as natural disasters, non-tariff barriers, sensitive lists in SAFTA, implementation of Regional Standards, poverty alleviation, food security, cooperation in higher education, simplification of visa procedures, terrorism, climate change, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, etc. It is heartening to note that the South Asian University, an idea mooted by the Indian Prime Minister at the Dhaka Summit in 2005, already started operation in July 2010 in New Delhi. The first batch of students has already passed out. An Institute of South Asian Studies is expected to be established in the University.

Another laudable development is the parallel proposal for the People's Union of SAARC, a civil society initiative. It is so because it would enhance people-to-people contacts, and it opens doors for better appreciating each other's social, political, and economic problems. It made a declaration called the New Delhi Declaration 2010 with the slogan 'Eradicate Poverty and Injustices by Building Bridges and Connecting People'. It calls for a South Asia free from all forms of 'discrimination, exclusion, and domination, specially women, tribal, and Dalit workers'. Its agenda also includes: pruning military expenditure, climate-change, a nuclear-free South Asia, terrorism,

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health, education, housing, etc. SAARC Journalists Summits, SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians' Conferences – and others such as lawyers, doctors – are the bold and appropriate initiatives to enhance civil society and people-to-people interactions. These should be taken forward along with the official or government-to-government interactions. Value-addition through people-to-people contacts is likely to be better sustained.

To re-emphasize economic cooperation, South Asia 'should utilize the trade-investment nexus, by promoting investment and liberalizing trade, ease visa restrictions and the free flow of information, create investment areas, and make efforts for vertical and horizontal production integration' (Khan and Larik, 2007: 33). Be that as it may, one has reasons to be optimistic when there is resurgence of democracy in the region, when Pakistan and India, and India and China are deepening their economic relations, and there are signs of the successful functioning of bi-lateral FTAs such as those between India and Sri-Lanka and Pakistan and Sri-Lanka. It would be wise, at the moment, for the countries to liberalize their own trade regimes, while taking some more time to fully operationalize SAFTA.

These developments provide a positive ambience which should be exploited realistically to take the integration deeper and wider. Along with it, norms, processes, rules, and institution-building should be emphasized which are otherwise lacking in the SAARC process. One may not lose sight of the observation by Traiq Fatemi *et al.* (2004: 82) that points out SAARC as an investment for peace, 'It goes without saying that a strong SAARC is an investment for peace in the region, as greater interaction would help to preempt differences becoming grave issues that threaten peace ... it still has the potential of acting as a peace broker.' Its role as a peace-broker may not be downplayed.

Conclusion

South Asia, although geographically a compact region, encounters hurdles in integrating itself to realize better common goods, due mainly to historical mistrust, political divisions, and high-politics. Its major powers are involved in globalized high-politics rather than assuming the mantle of taking regional integration forward. South Asia is one of the poorest regions of the world, and, to the disappointment of its people, its intra-regional trade is minimal. Its dividends could provide more common goods for the vast number of impoverished people. Formal integration efforts have taken some shape but could not as yet kick off due to the factors outlined above. It has many challenges to confront. Be that as it may, recently there are certain positive moves, such as the lowering of tariffs, overcoming non-tariff barriers, phasing-out the negative sensitive lists, granting MNF status, creating bi-lateral free-trade zones, etc. But a complete free trade zone as visualized in SAAFTA is yet to become a reality. However, efforts are on to move towards a Customs Union. In the final analysis, if both Pakistan and India could settle their scores that primarily shape the high-politics, then regional integration could leap forward. Transnational organized crime also needs

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effective handling. SAARC is moving in that direction along with putting emphasis on poverty alleviation.

To achieve such objectives, in-house political will needs to be generated in earnest. Sadly enough, there is ostensibly a dearth of political will in South Asia. External donor countries may come forward with economic support and value-addition. Granting observer status to extra-regional powers, such as the United States, China, and Japan, is a welcome gesture. One has to be optimistic, though cautiously. SAARC has shown the potential to emerge as a forum for dialogue, diplomacy, negotiations, and some kind of confidence building. It has contributed, may be not substantially, in cooling an otherwise heated environment in South Asia. However, the fact that eight SAARC nations' leaders are meeting once every year, both formally and informally, is in itself not a small achievement. And some kind of institution-building, though not carrying enough bite, provides impetus and capacity for moving forward. Sustaining impetus is, indeed, a formidable challenge for the South Asians.

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