

SAARC: An Overview India and Observers

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Abstract: SAARC was formed in 1985 to increase growth and development of member states by focusing mainly on economic integration, security issues, good governance, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, desiring stability in the region keeping into consideration the principle of non- interference in the internal affairs of each other. To get rid of poverty and have peace, political stability, trade, Economic growth, enhancing its cross-border and transit trade with neighboring countries, Road and railway connectivity, Afghanistan began showing her interest in SAARC and applied for membership but this created debate in each member state on Afghanistan's situation in Central Asia and not South Asia. On a condition of holding general elections, Afghanistan was given the membership of SAARC in 2007. US, Australia, South Korea, European Union, China, Iran, Japan, Mauritius, and Myanmar have the observers' status. Russia and turkey also applied for observer status.

Keywords: SAARC, formed, focusing, non- interference, Afghanistan, Central Asia, observer status.

Introduction

An association named South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to provide and promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through faster economic, social and cultural development was formed which is the largest economic and political organization of eight South Asian nations. President Ziaur Rahman visited India in December 1977 and discussed his future vision and the issue of regional cooperation with the Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. King Birendra expressed his will on sharing river waters. As the security situation in the region was deteriorating, the representatives of the seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. Ultimately after long discussions, all seven members agreed upon to get the draft prepared. This responsibility was assigned to Bangladesh. Initially, five broad areas namely, Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities and with this the formal Declaration on SAARC was adopted in 1983.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has nine Observers: Australia, China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Mauritius, Myanmar, the USA, and the European Union. SAARC is one of the few (if only) regional organizations in the world that has more observers than it does member states. China has also been pushing for getting a permanent membership of SAARC. "I wish to emphasize the importance of the role of the SAARC observers. During the last decade, bilateral trade has registered enormous growth reaching \$70bn in 2011. The year 2014 has been designated as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between India and China. The two sides have established a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2005). Afghanistan can contribute to the overall success of this forum as Afghanistan has great mineral and energy resources. The SAARC nations during the 'Buyer and Seller Meet on Trade Between South Asian Countries -Opportunities and Challenges' being organized by PHD Chambers under the aegis of PITEX 2.

India wants to improve relations with the observer countries. Russia is an old friend of India, during the 20th India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation' held on 5 November 2014, PM Modi reassured the Russian deputy PM Dmitry Rogozin special strategic partnership with Russia, including prioritizing the International North-South Corridor Project, Free Trade Agreement between India and the Eurasian customs union, focusing on enhancing economic partnership in areas like energy, civil aviation and diamond trade and the smart city project and signed a 16 agreements. Agreements on long term oil and gas cooperation have been signed between ONGC Videsh and Essar Oil of India and Russia's Rosneft, Gasprom Putin also promised to install 10 more nuclear reactors. In 2005 SAARC Summit, P.K. Kapur had told him that both PM Manmohan Singh and Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran supported a closer U.S. role in the regional body and requested feedback from the U.S. Mr. Kapur told the U.S. diplomat that the membership invitation extended to Afghanistan and the decision to offer China and Japan observer status were among the most important outcomes of the Summit.

Over the years SAARC has worked towards the development of economic relations among the SAARC nations. The inflow of foreign fund also recorded has increased substantially. Both Sri Lanka and Nepal have shown their interests to enhance intra regional trade with the increased intraregional trading activities; the economic relationship. India's is not living in a very congenial political atmosphere as the complexity of ethnic, linguistic, religious and political fabric in south Asia including China and Myanmar with contradictions, disparities, and paradoxes. India supports democracy but along with it respects the choice of each nation to have democracy, dominion or despotism, as best left to the people of the country. India is not a part of any major military alliance; it has a close strategic and military relationship with most of the major powers including the Russian Federation, Israel, Afghanistan, France, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the United States. Since India and Myanmar share common boundaries, they have to face problems of smuggling and illegal migration.

Summits are held periodically and each summit undertakes several specific programs. The South Asian Preferable Trade Agreement (SAPTA) was signed to inaugurate a new era of economic cooperation in South Asia. A SAARC Trade Fair with the theme “Cooperation for Growth” was organized in New Delhi. The South Asian Federation (SAF) Games are held by turn in each of the member countries. India hosted the first festival of the SAARC countries in 1992. For trade development, the first SAARC Trade Fair was held in New Delhi in 1996. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and India participated in the fair. The SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange program was launched in 1987. The SAARC Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism came into force in August 1988. The members also signed a SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1990. The launch of the South Asia satellite represents a wonderful integration of India’s “neighborhood-first” strategy. South Asian countries should abolish non-tariff barriers (NTBs) so that the free flow of trade happens unimpeded. SAARC Development Fund (approved in 2013) can be utilized for SMEs in the future. SAARC needs to have an additional focus on this aspect. Construction of proposed BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) corridor will be a landmark step towards this. India and Pakistan in maintaining political stability in the region, executing trade agreements, holding other members in SAARC and handling bilateral tensions.

India views that most of the observers at SAARC have not been active, restricting themselves to conducting a few training programs or seminars. This is all written and have been approved by the foreign ministers,” the official said. “Now, observers need to give projects for SAARC member countries in seven earmarked areas which will then be appraised and approved by the programming committee. Then, it needs to be communicated to the secretariat which will take a final call on whether the observer country can carry out the program”.

Conclusion

SAARC is an international body, which signifies the thoughts and ambitions of nearly 1.6 billion people. The Anti-India feeling fueled in most of the South Asian countries due to the mishandling of India’s foreign policy is leading to an even greater strain in relations. The future of some states in India such as Assam or Tripura is linked to their SAARC neighbor Bangladesh, while the fate of every SAARC country is linked to their neighboring state in India, West Bengal government’s opposition to the Teesta water-sharing agreement on its relations with Bangladesh. All countries should come and ensure that they will fight seriously to end terrorism. PM Modi wishes to bring SAARC nations together in space technology, agriculture, IT, education or health, the war on poverty can be successfully waged only on these terms. The problems such as overpopulation, poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy are severe. It is believed that India being the biggest country in the region should take a lead and help South Asia to progress fast through cooperation with each other and planning for development. In the 2nd SAARC Summit at Bangalore in 1986 and the 8th SAARC Summit at New Delhi in 1995, India played an important role to bring countries together and try to highlight the important issues and solve them. India desires to involve with the SAARC countries through various bilateral forums to have a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighborhood and has priority to close and good political, economic and cultural relations with its neighbors. India wants that bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from deliberations and the focus should be on overall development of the region.

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