

South Asian Integration: Progress of SAARC and BIMSTEC

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Abstract— This paper is about finding out the major progress of SAARC and BIMSTEC in regards of South Asian integration. The study begins with the query regarding the situation of integration of countries in the South Asian region. In this aspect, the definition of the South Asia as a region is first identified and then the paper moves forward to find out the possible examples of integration in the South Asian region. The core argument of this study is to explore the progress of SAARC since its founding in 1985 and the progress of BIMSTEC since its founding in 1997. The research moves forward with an aim of concluding this paper with a specific conclusion. In this case, the paper wants to assess the progress of these two regional institutions and then mark these two institutions with either failure or success. A conclusive remark may not be possible with the analysis of the collected data from secondary sources and if it's not possible, the study will mark it as an undefined or inconclusive argument. When the logical ground regarding the answer is vague, then no answer will be given to the core question. Therefore this research wants to assess the progress of SAARC and BIMSTEC in terms of regional development, beneficial delivery to the member countries and increasing cooperation among the member countries – these three aspects. It is a secondary data analysis trying to find out the progress of SAARC and BIMSTEC on the basis of three categories and then trying to assess the progress with sufficient logical argument.

Keywords— SAARC, BIMSTEC, Integration, South Asia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, BBIN

I. INTRODUCTION

The benefits of the state system remain as much granted because of the existence of no better system than this [1]. Regional Integration is neither a very old concept nor a very new concept in reference to the advent of the modern state system. The examples of Regional Integration can be found in the existence of the European Union (EU), Association of the South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) etc. In one of my previous writings, light was shed upon the need of regional economic integration [2]. The article focused on pointing out the benefits of regional economic integration and some other beneficial ideas like comparative advantage, trading and sharing the wealth and goods. At the later portion of the paper, it was attempted to point out the progress of ASEAN while the advancement of South Asian integration process was also taken into account. It is needless here to talk about the progress, benefits and threats of ASEAN and EU and the other

regional integration organizations. This paper's argument starts in the prospects of South Asian Integration.

It was argued by Sourabh Gupta that the advent of Narendra Modi in India was a positive sign for South Asian integration [3]. Modi has been regarded as a hopeful incarnation of South Asian integration with his further friendlier and liberal approach to India's neighbors [4]. He has been trying to behave well and encourage trade cooperation between the states rather than emphasizing upon to defect cooperation. This paper is about the progress of South Asian integration. In its way of capturing the scenario of South Asian integration, this paper holds two regional organizations of South Asia as its core concern. One of the organizations is SAARC – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the other is the lesser known and a very new one in fact, the BIMSTEC – Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. The paper attempts to find out what progress these two organizations have done so far in terms of their aspired goals and affirmations. The focus of this paper is not to draw a conclusion regarding whether these two organizations have either failed or succeeded. Rather the core concern of the paper is to shed light upon the decisions and prospective path these two organizations have created in terms of benefitting the South Asian region.

Whether Regionalism is good or bad is a concern and issue of debate. This paper does not want to lay its discussion upon that greatly debated area. It attempts to find out the major events of these two organizations and what have they provided and created for the states integrated into these two organizations. Success, Failure and Prospects are all subjective matters. In the conclusion part of this paper, a slight analysis will be given to project the future prospects of these two organizations regarding what more they can provide and what kind of barriers they should avoid. Nonetheless, this paper is written following secondary data analysis of qualitative methodology. The secondary data are collected from the writings of various South Asian experts and their opinions on these two organizations are also given priority. The aspects or areas to be covered of these two organizations vary from agriculture, science, student exchange to trade, policy implications, diplomacy and conflict mitigation or prevention. It is a very common misperception that economic success is the only way to judge or analyze the success of a regional organization. It's not true at all. A regional organization has various aspects that it covers and runs its operations in

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multidimensional ways. While focusing upon economy is a good way to put up individual needs and necessities, it is not everything. It is also very common to skip agriculture nowadays as a part of economic progress since industrialization and technological advancement have been perceived as the only parameters of economic advancement and success.

Another important word came from Mr. Tareq Ahmed, who had been working as the Director General of SAARC and BIMSTEC at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh. He insisted that the people, mostly influenced by the newspapers and their false interpretations, that when a meeting is cancelled, it is the sign of a failure. In other words, the public sentiment regarding regional organizations is that when an intergovernmental meeting or conference is postponed for a later time, it means there has been a failure to diplomatically reach an agreement. Therefore, the organization has failed. This is thus very outrageous to measure the success of an organization on the basis of the number of its successful and postponed/cancelled conferences or meetings. This is obviously evidence and numerical fact but the power of this fact is close to fully negligible. This paper would like to point out some major events and highlight some major programs and institutions of these two organizations which have somehow skipped the eyes of the general people and therefore people misperceive regional organizations as a bunch of incompetent tools to strengthen regional cooperation. As Tareq Ahmed put it in his words – “It is very wrong and narrow to summarize South Asian regional organizations as being impeded by Indian hegemony”.

The question of why these two regional organizations are important is very easily answerable. SAARC was formed in 1985 with a view to promote peaceful coexistence in the region [5]. There has been much argument and discussion regarding whether SAARC is dead and has completely failed [6]. So this paper thus identifies its important and very much necessary to point out what benefits and progressive operations SAARC has established since its creation. The case of BIMSTEC is somewhat different in the context that it is very new in terms of its establishment and the people of this region seems to be unaware that this organization actually exists in reality. In terms of Bangladesh, BIMSTEC got attention for the first time in 2014 as its permanent secretariat was established in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh that year. So it is important to let the South Asian people know about the operations and activities of BIMSTEC and what kind of benefits and services it has been providing to them regardless of its cancelled and postponed meetings and conferences.

II. THE FIRST ONE: SAARC

It is a common view that SAARC is divided and it cannot create cooperation on the basis that regional problems and tensions cannot be solved within its premises [7]. The tension and failure of SAARC and its sub-organizations have

sometimes been attributed to the India-Pakistan regional rivalry [8]. In the evidence pointed out by Iqbal and Nawaz, it seems that Pakistan’s deliberative security dilemma and defective policies have forcedly prevented cooperation despite India’s goodwill [9]. However, the failure of SAARC policies or agreements is not only limited to this one regional rivalry. It is to be understood that every country wants to maximize and secure its national interest - both in realist and liberal ways. Even if a state is liberal in its foreign policy making, the core goal of the state is to maximize its interests. So whenever a state’s interest is hurt bad or an agreement of the regional organization is not supposed to serve the positive of that state, the state is generally forwarded towards disagreeing on that issue. Although regionalism is sometimes about comprising for the greater good, it is very rare that a state will compromise without having any benefit in the long run. An example of defying agreement outside India-Pakistan rivalry was pointed out by the Director General, Tareq Ahmed. He emphasized on the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) between the BBIN (Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal – a sub-organization of SAARC) where three of the countries agreed to the conditions only except Bhutan. Bhutan disagreed on the basis that the trucks and motor vehicles passing with the free trade access into its area would cause huge pollution to its excellent air atmosphere. Therefore, Bhutan was the country to defect here avoiding compromise, not India – the Hegemon.

The progress of SAARC can be measured in various dimensions since its birth in 1985. The first attempt to increase trade among the states in this region was SAPTA (SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement) which was signed in 1993 [10]. Although it increased the volume of trade marginally, according to Akanksha Khullar, it was a great failure [11]. In 2006, the earnestly longed SAFTA was signed [12]. SAFTA’s prospects were besieged by wonderful opportunities, but the economic interests of the states have degraded its possibilities to a great extent [13].

In terms of trade and economic aspects, SAARC’s initiatives can be seen as Business entrepreneurs gone bankrupt with minimal operation. An initiative in the aspects of connectivity was the creation of BBIN network which was a realization of these four countries to promote more flexible connectivity among them in order to improve mutual benefits [14]. One very important aspect of BBIN is that there is no Pakistan in this sub-group and the countries included in this list are also promoters of open economy [15]. Although Bhutan denied to ratify the MVA, it did not affirm that it is not at all possible, rather its stance was that Bhutan is not yet ready for this agreement [16]. However, BBIN is not only limited to connectivity and economic turns, as pointed out earlier, regional integration covers diverse areas including trade and economy. As Prabir De pointed out, BBIN has arranged meetings to cover issues of Power (Hydroelectricity) and Water Resources Management [17]. It is a very negligent act to therefore tag regional organizations with narrow summarizations. Meanwhile, BBIN is also a sub-group of

BIMSTEC alongside SAARC [18].

The creation of SAF (South Asia Forum) was also an initiative taken by SAARC to promote public-private partnership and ties [19]. There have been discussions going on regarding 'Railways Agreement' [20]. The SAARC Agricultural Information Center (SAIC) started working in 1988 with a view to promoting agriculture in the regional level [21]. It was later renamed in 2007 as SAC (SAARC Agriculture Center) and it has been working relentlessly in information management of agriculture in an agriculture-dependent global region [22]. This is one aspect that has been easily ignored by most of the people in terms of finding out SAARC's progress. The SAARC journal of Agriculture is regularly published by the center and it has been very much successful in disseminating its findings in the field of agriculture whether people recognizes it or not. There have been several meetings held between Science and Technology ministers of the SAARC countries within times [23]. In 1995, SAARC established the SAARC Meteorological Research Center (SMRC) which has been destined to conduct regional research and conduct studies to find out the regional hydrological, meteorological and climate understandings [24].

SAARC student exchange program is also another aspect where SAARC has successfully been able to make the students learn about the interregional culture and traditions. Students from different regions have also led the students to have the original meaning of university where a diverse array of ideas have converged and students have therefore been able to enrich themselves. Rehman Sobhan, has however emphasized on the economic integration of South Asia focusing on the benefits of market integration and comparative advantage, indirectly promoting the SAFTA [25]. Debapriya Bhattacharya has pointed out the prospects of regional integration in South Asia which would further enhance the chances of fulfilling SDGs with the strengthening of SAARC [26]. SAARC therefore stands with much prospects with a long path yet to be covered by it to take a milestone symbol similar to the European Union.

III. THE CHILD: BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC was established in 1997 and had its 20-year anniversary celebrated last year [27]. The members of the BIMSTEC include – Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan [28]. It is very unique its name and its convergence to the specific area of the Bay of Bengal. The core concern of the BIMSTEC is to enhancing access to the untapped natural resources in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, where the resources are namely – Oil, Ruby, Gas and Hydro power [29]. Although trade is a top priority converging to mainstream ideas, BIMSTEC has some other aspects to cover too.

Prabir De attributed three positives to the BIMSTEC in case of its potential [30]. These three positives are – a) The existence of a permanent secretariat and an intensely active Secretary General b) Bilateral tension management has made

its path easier to advance and c) No existence of Pakistan lessens the risk of conflict escalation and thus cooperation prevention between the states alongside hindering the prospects of SAARC [31].

However, it is also a misconception that BIMSTEC and SAARC are rivals. It should not be measured in this way. If the cooperation platform provided by these two organizations can be utilized for beneficial purposes, these two can become supplementary to each other in case of cooperation enhancement in South Asia. Myanmar and Thailand – these two countries are absent from the organization while they are well attached to the Indian Ocean and the South Asian countries. The lacking of not having them in SAARC can be additionally complemented by the existence of BIMSTEC. Similar kind of characteristics exists in the BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC misses out Afghanistan, Pakistan and Maldives – three attached countries of the South Asian region. SAARC supplements this lacking of BIMSTEC. Thus it can be very much evident that they are not actually adversary or competitive regional organizations in the same regional bloc, rather they are both working for advancing benefits for the states of this whole region.

The unique prospect of the BIMSTEC being bilateral tension-free has attracted the USA and Japan to focus on it [32]. Shinzo Abe has emphasized to establish a Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) as it is geographically more well defined than SAARC and it has greater dynamism because of its extensive membership of peaceful neighbors [33]. Although BIMSTEC had started its journey with a view to managing sub-regional social and economic development issues, in 2005, it affirmed to work on the issues of counter-terrorism, transnational crime and disaster management [34]. A BRICS-BIMSTEC Summit was held in October 2016 in India for the first time which garnered BIMSTEC a worldwide attention as a regional group [35]. Maritime security cooperation is another area where the countries are relying on the mechanism of BIMSTEC [36]. BIMSTEC has also recently rhetorically wished to engage globally rather than confining itself to the specific region of South Asia only [37].

While South Asia has not yet witnessed any Free Trade Area in reality, BIMSTEC had an agreement in 2017 where the countries converged to form an FTA (Free Trade Area) [38]. The Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) is also there to be seriously considered by both the countries which would join the Southeast Asian region (Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar) to South Asia [39].

IV. CONCLUSION

The prospects of both SAARC and BIMSTEC lies high. However, if an honest opinion is to be given regarding which one is standing better, the answer might be very clearly that it is BIMSTEC. Yet there are some opportunities that both of the organizations should look for. SAARC should try to make its Student Center, Student Exchange Programs, Agriculture Center and Meteorology Center better in order to scientifically

and agriculturally advance the region. However, it is a universal opinion that Pakistan is a sole problem to the cooperation prospects of SAARC. For Pakistan there, sub-groups should be formed which is propounded as the best solution to SAARC's relative deadlock situation [40]. BIMSTEC should look upon the following matters – first, improving and working on the issues of connectivity (digital and maritime) and backend infrastructure according to Prabir De [41]. Second, focusing on the maritime architecture and security issues which can enhance the trade, cooperation to a great extent [42]. In final words, BIMSTEC needs to reaffirm its policies and should sign new meaningful agreements to counter terrorism in the region and prevent transnational crimes such as – drug trafficking, human trafficking etc. what had been affirmed by the organization back in 2005 and it is important that BIMSTEC is not forgetting about this affirmation.

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