

Historic initiative taken for South Asian Regional Cooperation

by Susan Maitra

At a heads of a state summit in Dhaka, Bangladesh on Dec. 7-8, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formally launched, and with it, a new and potentially powerful regional grouping representing nearly one-quarter of the world's population was put on an institutional footing.

The leaders of seven South Asian nations—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives—signed a simple charter of association to promote active cooperation in economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields, both among themselves and with other developing countries.

Since the August 1983 foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi, which adopted a political declaration and an "Integrated Programme of Action" in nine areas to get regional cooperation started, South Asian leaders have been careful to root the process in active collaboration rather than rhetoric.

This practical orientation was given a qualitative boost in Dhaka with the heads of state mandate to set up panels to look into the problems of terrorism and drug trafficking, respectively, as they affect the security and stability region. A third critical decision was taken to convene a ministerial level meeting to lay the groundwork for concerted regional action on a new world economic order and other pressing international trade and financing issues.

In fact, nothing less than meaningful action on basic issues has a chance of overturning nearly 40 years of petty and not-so-petty squabbling—Pakistan and India have fought three wars—between these neighboring nations set at each others' throats as a matter of principle of British colonial policy. But the benefits to these same nations, and indeed to the world, of their successful cooperation are truly stunning. Not only do they represent nearly one-quarter of the world's population, nearly one billion souls whose mighty contribution to the world waits only on the provision of power, tools, and a rising standard of living, but the abundance of natural and human resources among them—from the waters of Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra to the developed space and

atomic energy technologies of India's ISRO and BARC—could, if properly shared, shift the region's rate of development into second gear and transform the enormous potential into a dynamic reality in a short period of time. With no exaggeration did one official here state that SAARC was potentially the most powerful regional grouping in the world.

An institutional footing

Bangladesh President Lt.-Gen. H. M. Ershad, host to the heads of state summit and the organization's newly elected chairman, told a press conference following the summit that SAARC will not be a paper organization. The decision to meet annually, or if and when necessary, taken by the heads of state on the suggestion of Pakistani President Zia ul Haq, is just one indication of the leaders' deep commitment to making SAARC an effective instrument. The unanimous decision, at Bangladesh's suggestion, to establish a permanent secretariat to carry on administrative and other work related to the organization's programs is another. The secretariat will be lodged temporarily in Dhaka until a decision is taken on a permanent venue.

The next summit has already been set for November 1986 in New Delhi, and the third in 1987 at Thimpu, Bhutan.

The SAARC charter provides for:

- A council of ministers including the member countries' foreign ministers to meet in regular session "as often as possible" to formulate policies and review the progress of cooperation.
- A standing committee of the nations' foreign secretaries, which will meet at least once a year, and will conduct overall monitoring and evaluation of program implementation, approval of projects, determination of priorities, and mobilization of resources.
- A series of technical committees will direct the individual programs.
- Contributions toward financing the SAARC and its programs is to be voluntary, with provisions for appropriate external funding if required.

● Finally, two general provisions establish that decisions at every level will be taken on the basis of unanimity and that "bilateral and contentious" issues will be excluded from deliberations.

There was a meeting of the minds of the seven leaders as to the summit's historic nature. The inspiration to finally overcome the barriers that artificially separate peoples of a common cultural-historical heritage in the region was celebrated in poetry following an opening ceremony that featured readings from the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist scriptures, and the Bible. Summit host Lieutenant-General Ershad, a poet in his own right, read two compositions heralding the "dream of seven countries" written for the occasion, and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi brought the gathering to its feet by concluding his speech with a rendering of Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's "We will bring a new dawn. . ." in Bengali.

The SAARC process

The Dhaka summit grew out of the 1981 suggestion of the late President of Bangladesh, Zia-ur-Rahman, to set up a regional forum to facilitate cooperation among the countries

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of the region in infrastructure, economic, social, and cultural fields. After several years of informal discussion and exploration of various possibilities for cooperation, the first step was taken toward South Asian regional cooperation in 1983. A meeting of foreign ministers in New Delhi adopted a political declaration as the basis for such cooperation and launched an "action programme" in areas that had been identified during the preparatory discussions.

Joint activities have been ongoing for two years in the areas of agriculture, health, meteorology, postal services, scientific and technological cooperation, rural development, sports, arts and culture, telecommunications, and transport. Organization of workshops and training seminars, commissioning of technical studies aimed at identifying regional projects of merit, publication of directories, and exchange of experts have been taking place in all these areas. Proposals for the establishment of regional centers for meteorological research, agricultural research and development, shipping and transport, software development, and so on, are now on the table.

Among the most significant studies undertaken so far is a study on the optimization of the operational efficiency in the railway systems of the region and a study on the traffic flows and inter-modal distribution of traffic in the region.

The potential for the regional economies that is implicit in the capability represented by India's INSAT satellite system, which provides constant meteorological monitoring of the region, and its mastery of nuclear-power technology is clearly enormous.

A promising lead

By all accounts, the seven leaders' formal speeches and informal exchanges were frank and to the point. "We are formally launching the ship," said the beleaguered Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene. "I hope there would be no mutiny on board." It was patently the kind of remark that could not be made if the fear were real. Indeed, as President Ershad told a skeptical reporter, it was the atmosphere of amity in the region that made it possible for the leaders to decide that bilateral issues could be solved by discussion instead of dragging them into multilateral forums. "I can certainly tell you that there is much less mistrust among the countries," he added.

India, as the physically overwhelming power in the region, has been the focus of small-nation paranoia on the part of its neighbors, and has gone out of its way in the recent period to strengthen relations with them. The Rajiv Gandhi government has made this an explicit policy priority. The change in relations with Bangladesh, the establishment of constructive assistance to Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis, and even the persistent and creative efforts to break through with Pakistan are the best testimony of India's commitments.

While the SAARC is in no way envisioned as a substitute for bilateral and multilateral relations—"bilateral and contentious" issues have in fact been ruled out of order—there is not one iota of doubt that the association's work will inevitably promote resolution of some of the knottier political problems of the region and the world.

Two of the most serious of these issues are precisely the issues of terrorism and drug trafficking, which the heads of state have made the focus of their inaugural initiative, at the suggestion of Bangladesh. An expert committee set up by the standing committee of foreign secretaries will go into the problem of drug trafficking and drug abuse in the region and measures to tackle it. A similar committee will probe the matter of terrorism as it affects the region. Both studies will be forwarded to the council of ministers for recommendations on action.

At the same time, a ministerial level meeting will be convened to prepare the ground for concerted regional action in the ongoing discussions on the New International Economic Order and the improvement of the world trading system. Pakistan's offer to host this meeting, as well as the meeting of the technical committee on the subject, was accepted.