

FOCUS

SADQ and the Politics of Subregionalism

by Dr Abul Kalam

As SAGQ is being launched, there appears a growing apprehension about the redundancy and duplication of SAARC vis-a-vis the more recent intra-regional scheme. In proposing the SADT, (South Asia Development Triangle), the World Bank seems inclined toward a replication of the ASEAN experience, whereas the South Asian proponents have decided to put a different cap on it.

REGIONALISM, subregionalism and inter-regional cooperation have evolved as new, innovative phenomena in the post-war international system. They are perceived as panacea for avoiding traumatic course of conflict and maximizing efforts for development.

Geographical proximity has been the single most important criterion in the developing process of subregional groupings in the international system, but there has also been a sense of urgency in creating a peaceful strategic environment in order to fulfill the developmental aspirations of the people at large through forging cultural links and economic cooperation. Finally, there has also been an interest in contributing to systemic stability by exerting a collective voice on regional and international issues. All these concerns have combined to motivate political decision makers, intellectuals and business leaders alike to seek wider cooperation in all different fields at the regional and subregional levels.

It was Western Europe which made the first regional effort in the 1950s, maturing itself in the subsequent decades, and its success came to be replicated elsewhere in the world. Co-operation for development, like that for peace, has often proved to be deceptive, as both are quite often used and misused as de-bauchery notations for the ends of politics. Unfortunate as it may seem, South Asia, more specifically Bangladesh at its national level, is currently experiencing the very traumatic course of politics in the name of development co-operation, which such co-operative endeavours are meant to avoid.

Background of Asian Co-op-

eration: In the Asian continent, both Southeast Asia and South Asia currently have their own regional entities: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), each fashioned itself in its respective region for the purpose of cooperative endeavours. SAARC is one of the youngest in regional groupings, born in the backdrop of multiple complexities of history, geography and geopolitics in South Asia.

SAARC's "Go-slow" Approach: There has been a persistent feeling that, despite a high-profile annual summity, SAARC has so far adopted a "go-slow" approach in its search for regionalism in South Asia, as compared to ASEAN, which through a "low-key" fashion of diplomacy has moved speedily toward both integrative endeavour and faster growth. By mobilizing its collective strength ASEAN has already developed itself as a truly "merchandise trade-oriented society", while SAARC nations remain trapped in utter poverty. South Asia thus even over a decade after the creation of SAARC is viewed as a region of "high profile and low performance." ASEAN's success story in regional endeavour has become a matter of envy and inspiration.

ASEAN's "Growth Triangles": ASEAN's regional effort has taken multiple shape and form. A significant area of its intra-regional or subregional effort concerns what is known as "growth triangles", uniting three geographically close regions of member-countries to derive economic benefits through complementarity. The examples of such successful initiatives include the southern growth triangle, the northern growth triangle, the East ASEAN Growth Area (EAGA), though successes in these cases are known to be of varying order, with each having its ceiling in its situational context.

SAARC and Subregionalism: There has been a strong belief in some South Asian countries that they can to their advantage replicate the ASEAN mode of subregional cooperation. Since the last quarter of 1996 there has indeed been an orchestrated campaign in some interested ruling circles in South Asian capitals to mobilize opinion in favour of such a subregional scheme. Accordingly, frequent references were made to the provisions for such a cooperative venture under Article (7) of the SAARC Charter, which mentions about Action Committees for specific projects for development purpose between more than two members. Position papers, christened as "Approach Paper" or "Concept Paper" from the governments concerned were presented and/or circulated at the official meetings, though detailed aspects of such papers or true source of their origins are yet to be made public.

SADT vs SAGQ: The World Bank, apparently seemed impressed with the ASEAN experience of growth triangle, has shown its eagerness to support similar co-operative venture in South Asia. It has indeed unveiled a basin-wise scheme to promote what it projected as "South Asia Development Triangle" (SADT), with a programme of transboundary development cooperation encompassing most of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin and covering the eastern and northeastern parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.

The World Bank mooted its initiative within the framework of SAARC and saw the growth triangle as strategically located at the hub of the Bay of Bengal forming a potentially convenient link between East, Southeast and Central Asian and West European countries. There is thus a broad perspective, a holistic approach toward development, the idea being to complement the World Bank's current assistance programme and to help develop a vision of wider regional development opportunities combining coherent strategic investment plans, supportive policy measures and greater energy of local action programmes across borders.

Bureaucratic Superstructure: The official-level meeting of the four secretaries of the countries concerned, however, named the initiative as South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and decided

to go ahead without considering it as an initiative under SAARC, though for a long time the consistent official position in Bangladesh was that any subregional cooperation would be within the framework of SAARC.

Already sectors are designated for ostensible cooperation involving the four states; but the fear is quite strong in political quarters of Bangladesh that SAGQ is an expedient scheme backed by the leading regional power, India, to advance its own national agenda. The SAGQ is thus seen as a camouflage for meeting India's desperate need for transit/corridor through Bangladesh and access to Chittagong port for containing insurgency in Indian northeast. In the process, while Nepal and Bhutan may be used as "proxies", Bangladesh may have to surrender the geographical advantages to the common service of the region for a frivolous promise of countervailing gains in a distant future.

The ASEAN experience of intra-regional cooperation, particularly its window of "growth triangle" may be appraised in this context, as it may provide useful insight into development model and practice of intra-regional cooperation.

As SAGQ is being launched, there appears a growing apprehension about the redundancy and duplication of SAARC vis-a-vis the more recent intra-regional scheme. In proposing the SADT, the World Bank seems inclined toward a replication of the ASEAN experience, whereas the South Asian proponents have decided to put a different cap on it.

Pertinent Questions: The manner and processes of decision-making in the very launching of the subregional grouping by a bureaucratic superstructure raised more questions, than providing answers, about it. One naturally feels provoked to raise questions, such as: what were the premises guiding and motivating the countries concerned to launch SADT? What are the converging perceptions and interests? What were processes of decision making, leading to the creation of the new subregional mechanism? How did the national policy makers debate or deliberate upon the relevant issues before launching such a supranational mechanism? To what extent are the multilateral funding organizations, like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, interested to contribute to the fruition of such an experience? What is the position of the concerned national governments to the association and involvement of the multilateral funding agencies? Had there been any appraisal or evaluation of the particular "growth triangle" experiences of the ASEAN, which, among others, is mentioned as a model for similar initiatives for South Asia? How other SAARC members not being included in the SADT or non-SAARC members having vital interests in transboundary co-operation feel

about such subregional cooperative ventures? How Bangladesh can appropriately learn and benefit from such a mode development, as some countries like Singapore, had gained from the southern growth triangle of the ASEAN?

Growth Structure: Whose Child? In addressing these pertinent questions, the political decision makers, specialists and intellectual elites in a poverty-stricken country such as ours can ill-afford to be euphoric or lend support towards an imaginary structures of growth. The issues that the foregoing questions raise are not known to have never been deliberated at the level of Jatiya Sangsad, so much heralded as "the focus of all national activity" nor have they been even placed at the recently concluded Council Session of the ruling party, Bangladesh Awami League. Neither the Cabinet nor the Awami League Parliamentary party is known to have discussed the issue at all.

In similar situations, most countries of the world would either place such a vital issue either for national referendum or at least for a sanction by the national parliament by a two-thirds majority. The transparency so much desired and the democratic accountability the nation has so much been promised seem a far cry.

Multilateral Funding: While the national governments of the subregional grouping have serious resource constraints, they may have to rely mostly on donor funding for their ambitious schemes of subregional growth. But with the conceptual divergence between the SADT and the SAGQ, the multilateral funding agencies may not be very forthcoming to back up schemes not quite compatible with their own plans. There thus seems a loss of perspective on this score as well. At any rate, New Delhi seems least interested in donor funding, as any international involvement, even if for resource allocation, with an enhanced multilateralism and transparency may mean a diminution of her "perceived" regional dominance and influence.

SAGQ, Insurgency and Counter-insurgency: Even if India was to be quite forthcoming

about subregionalism for growth, how could one ensure a sustained effort towards that end, given an intensified scale of insurgency as well as counter-insurgency operations in India's northeastern states? In this context one has to keep in perspective the very fact that a prevailing state of insurgent activities in southern part of Thailand and in northern tip Sumatra (Indonesia) is often blamed for the relative failure of the northern growth triangle in the ASEAN. Therefore, unless India's current counter-insurgency campaign in its northeastern states comes to a successful conclusion Bangladesh will be merely get sucked into the domestic turmoil of its great neighbour, though perhaps in the name of economic growth. Bangladesh can ill-afford to get into this predicament.

As to the response from those countries not proposed as member-beneficiaries of the growth mechanism of SAGQ, Pakistan has already expressed its reservations about it, while Beijing seems inclined to feel that there can hardly be any cooperation on the Brahmaputra basin, without China being included in it.

The Right Approach: Certainly a sustained growth for Bangladesh is the most desired goal. The question is: how to attain this goal? Before working towards subregionalism for growth, each country — including Bangladesh — should, first of all, strive towards attaining its national consensus on such a vital issue; for, after all, there can be no growth without national consensus, and launching of any amount of "growth" mechanism without a national consensus could only be more divisive, detrimental to the very cause for which such mechanism is proposed. The provision for Action Committee and a project-wise approach, as is provided in the SAARC Charter [Article 7], seems to provide the right yardstick. It will involve functionalist approach, notional frame sanctioned by the Charter. The four concerned governments may begin from water-resource sharing, indeed from their respective water accords, and in phases, as the momentum grows in terms of both consensus and co-operation, move towards further growth endeavours. International donors as well as other concerned regional and extra-regional actors would then have no ground but to render support to endeavours towards subregional growth.

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Dhaka Day by Day

No Time for Books

by Fayza Haq

YOU YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T READ BOOKS LIKE WE OL' MEN DO! ... WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?



There is a feeling that the reading habit is declining among people in Dhaka. People have so many distractions that books tend to take a secondary place.

Sharmin, an NGO worker living in Lalmaia says, "Today when I go home after my office I read light romances — the type of books I never descended to read even as a teenager. It takes my mind off my depression and helps me relax after the day's heavy routine. The other day someone offered me EM Foster's 'Howard's End'. I read half of it without interest before returning it. I received five books for my birthday. I still haven't touched any of them. They seem too serious and thick. I plan to read every weekend but Friday comes and goes and I fail to touch the books."

Ayesha, who lives in Purana Paltan, is very worried about her granddaughter, "Aasha does not appear to read anything but Bangla comics. Her mother goes out to work and so do I. We are too tired to sit with my granddaughter in the evening. Although Aasha has a tutor, she has poor marks in both English and Bangla. We have changed her school but she has not improved." Nasreen, who lives in Dhanmandi says, "In our days, three decades back we would steal time to get books. When my brothers were at college in the afternoons, doing their science experiments, I would slyly take their cupboard keys and read everything from Sherlock Holmes to DH Lawrence. Even in college we spent a lot of time in the library and at home reading poetry, fiction and drama. Now I find my children crazy about videos and the cable TV. They do read at times but their interest never goes beyond detective novels. After their spell with the tutor my sons go out for cricket and football and so the day ends."

Enam, who is an office executive in Motijheel says, "nowadays people decorate their drawing-rooms' shelves and coffee tables with hard bound books and best sellers. They may be interested in Hardy and Camus but they certainly don't read them as a regular habit. They even keep books in German and French but that's all to impress and to create an atmosphere. These people spend their evenings playing cards or tennis to keep themselves trim. They keep 'Time' 'The Economist' and 'Newsweek' but apart from leafing through them casually, reading a few catchy bits of news, their reading is limited to newspaper scandals and gossips, tidbits and the head lines."

Dilshad, a housewife in Tikatuly says, "when we were young, we read Tollstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Zola, Hemingway, Faulkner and the rest. Today, I just handle the house-work and children and after that something like Flaubert is too much for me. I sometimes even find the cover stories in the local magazines heavy reading. I feel hesitant to correct my daughters when I go in for Jackie Collins, Sidney Sheldon and Jeffrey Archer. I have to entertain my husband's guests too. As I do the cooking, my day is full. I barely get time to bathe the dog and check the rose plants in the garden."

Zahida, a grandmother of four, living in DOHS says, "Twenty years ago, when my husband was alive, I had plenty of servants and time for my reading of novels and magazines. Today I have so much on my hand that I can barely read the feature page of the 'Dainik Bangla' and flip through the other English dailies."

For the younger generation there is the lure of the video, cable TV and rock music on the cassettes. Parents are glad when children take interest in tennis, volleyball and cricket. As a result serious reading is often ignored or given a secondary importance. As long as the children get a place in good schools and universities, the parents do not complain.

Metropolitan

International Nursing Day today

International Nursing Day will be observed today in Bangladesh and the rest of the world, reports BSS.

May 12 is an important day for nurses all over the world as it marks the anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing.

The day will be observed in Bangladesh through discussion meeting and holding of cultural functions at various nursing institutions and dormitories of nursing.

Prof Amanullah, State Minister for Health and Family Welfare while highlighting the important role nurses play in medicare stated the government is committed to employ more nurses in public sector to improve prevailing health service system.

Addressing a press conference on the eve of International Nursing Day, Prof Amanullah said without nurses all high-tech and newer medicine would be useless. He said with the health policy now in the final stage of formulation, the status and service condition of nurses will be improved.

country, he added. The seminar was chaired by Prof Muhtasham Hussain and was addressed by prominent atomic energy expert Dr M A Wazed Miah, DV Gupta, Chairman and Managing Director of Central Electronics Limited of India and Dr BMS Bist, Director, Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy Sources, Government of India.

Dr Wazed Miah said, country has skilled manpower to produce solar energy and the activities should be started as soon as possible. And in this regard an efficient management is necessary, he added.

He said Bangladesh should immediately look for renewable energy as it has been struggling with scarce energy resources.

Noor Uddin Khan, head of Seminar and Institutional Development of AMIC is conducting the workshop.

Information Secretary Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed inaugurated the workshop.

Dr Shaikh Abdus Salam, Director General, Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) made the opening remarks.

Workshop for women journalists begins in city

A five-day workshop on newspaper management for senior women journalists began at a city hotel yesterday, reports BSS.

Information Secretary Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed inaugurated the workshop.

Dr Shaikh Abdus Salam, Director General, Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) made the opening remarks.

Fifteen women journalists from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are participating in the workshop, jointly organised by Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), Singapore and Press Institute of Bangladesh.

Joe Ma Carlos, head of Seminar and Institutional Development of AMIC is conducting the workshop.

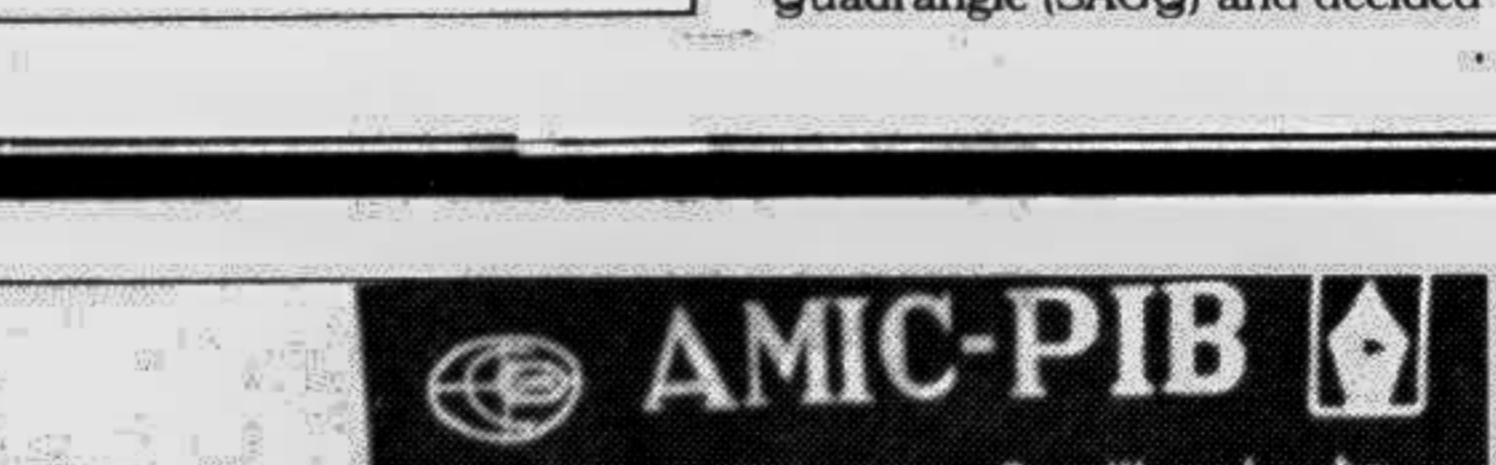
Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed, in his speech, said this workshop would usher in a new era for women journalists, especially those working in Bangladesh.

Women journalists here are generally engaged in reporting and editing but not in managerial work, he said, adding that they will be encouraged to take up work such as advertising and administrative functions which are also very important in running a newspaper.

Dr Salam assured that PIB would help newspapers equip their women journalists with managerial skills by arranging training courses, workshops and seminars.

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Noor Uddin Khan tells seminar Country will go for solar energy system soon

Energy Minister Lt Gen (retd) Noor Uddin Khan said Bangladesh will go for solar energy system soon as its potential source of energy, reports BSS.

He was addressing a seminar on "Dissemination of solar photovoltaic technology," jointly organized here by Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and Bangladesh Solar Energy Society.

Because of the geographical condition of the country it is difficult to ensure power supply to different parts of the country, the minister said. So, he said, the country needs to depend on renewable energy.

Noor Uddin said, the Rural Electrification Board has started a solar unit on experimental basis and can share Indian experience in this field as India made significant progress in solar energy sector.

Dr Bist said, "we are ready to provide necessary help in producing solar energy" and described the progress his country has made in this field.

Senior journalists and management specialists from Bangladesh and two resource persons from India will conduct different sessions of the workshop.



Bangladesh Garments Workers Federation held a rally in support of its various demands in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

— Star photo



German Ambassador to Bangladesh Bruno Weber handing over keys of 12 locomotives to Communications Minister Anwar Hossain at Kamalapur Railway Station in the city yesterday.

— Star photo

The detailed schedule of the examinations will be announced soon.

They also called for formulating a national Hajj policy and give subsidy to Hajj pilgrims.

Tahfiz-e-Haramine Parishad, Bangladesh has called for investigation into "irregularities" by Bangladeshi officials during Hajj this year, reports BSS.

At a press conference in the city yesterday, the parishad accused the officials of Bangladesh Biman and Ministry of Religious Affairs of mismanagement and nepotism.

They also called for formulating a national Hajj policy and give subsidy to Hajj pilgrims.

FAO Director General Dr Jacques Diouf yesterday said that a fund raising initiative has been taken through a TV programme called "Telefood," based on the solutions to malnutrition and hunger prevailing in the world, reports UNB.

The programme has been formulated in light of the decisions taken in the World Food Summit held in Rome last year, he said while talking to State Minister for Information Prof Abu Sayeed at his Secretariat office yesterday.

The visiting FAO Director General also said that this programme would be telecast in different countries of the world via satellite on October 18-19 next.