

# Strategic proposals from SAARC Summit

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THE recently concluded Thirteenth SAARC Summit has had a catalytic effect. It has resulted in discussion in the electronic media, many introspective articles in newspapers and periodicals and comments on the radio. There might have been differences on various aspects of the Meeting, but there has also been consensus on one element. Everyone agrees that South Asian nations have to show resolve and maturity and grasp opportunities to become a major engine of growth for the global economy.

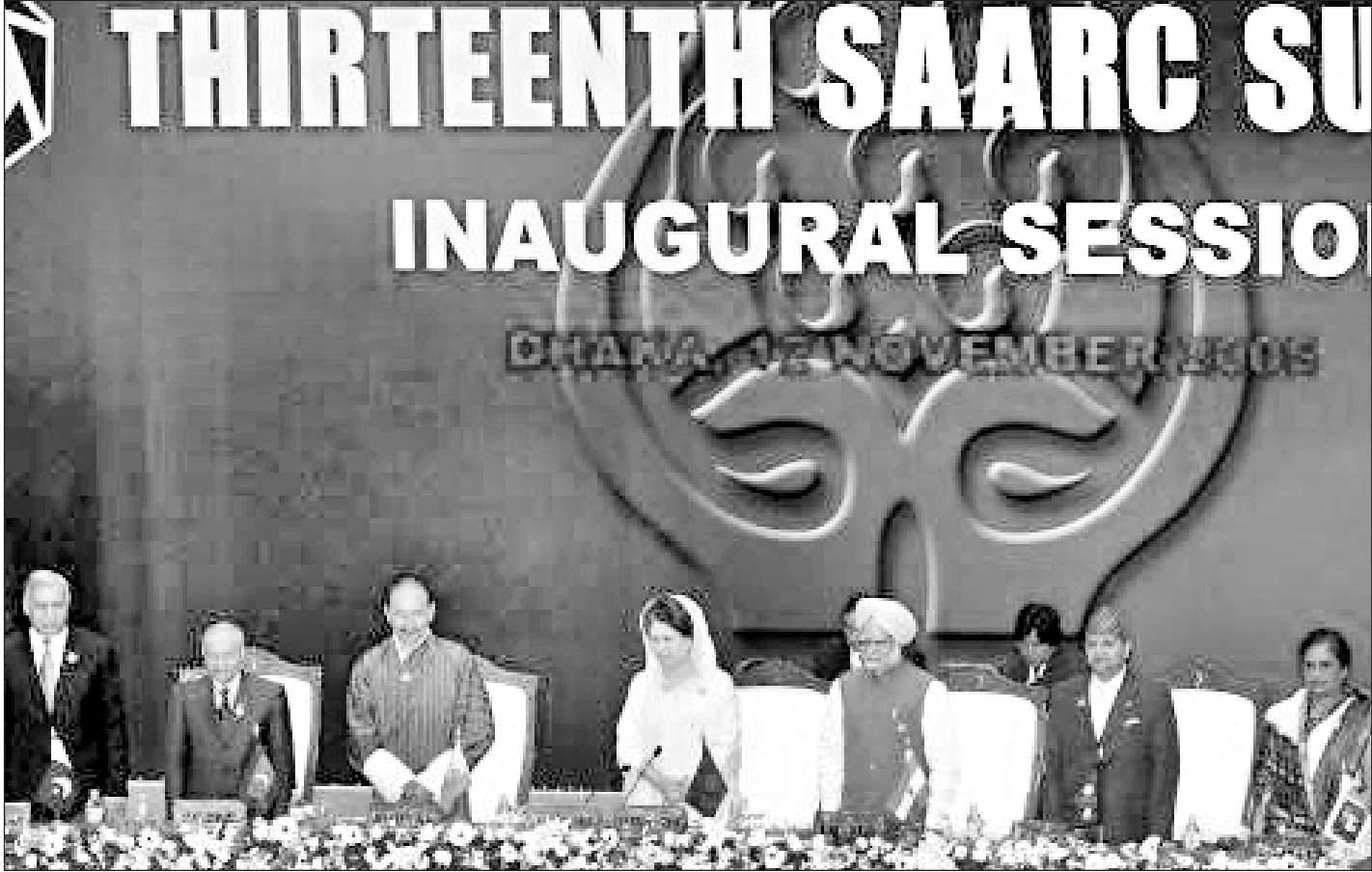
The Summit leadership have reiterated the shared destiny of this region. They have similarly underlined that poverty and prosperity are indivisible. Over the last two weeks I have written three articles on various aspects of SAARC. One dealt with the philosophy that led to SAARC, the second was on the SAARC process and the third dealt with the denotations present in the Dhaka Declaration issued at the conclusion of the Dhaka Summit. In this column I will deal with some strategic issues that surfaced during the South Asian meeting and also their implications.

The most significant element was the realisation that there was a need for a South Asian perspective in dealing with existing problems. There was awareness that South Asian integration demanded a firm approach. It was also clear from the various statements that substantive and comprehensive consideration was required of relevant items on the plate. In all probability, this arose out of the criticism that SAARC was yet to formulate, let alone implement, a single regional project.

Another important factor was general acceptance of four constraints: that national self-assertion still impedes regional cooperation, that SAARC had made little dent on alleviating poverty, that decision-making in SAARC was slow and cumbersome and that SAARC does not work closely with similar organisations. Such a self-assessment, I believe, will eventually contribute towards the growth of SAARC.

During review of SAARC activities at the various levels, participants also highlighted its failure to live up to its potential. Discussions particularly underscored the following- 'inability to- significantly improve the socio-economic status of its people; trigger intra-regional trade which is still mired to less than 4 per cent compared to 66 per cent for the European Union and 28 per cent for the ASEAN and act as a basic harmonising force to instil larger confidence building and security'.

In this context, senior officials stressed that what SAARC required was 'consolidation of past gains in the core areas of economic growth, implementation of agreed SAARC initiatives, programmes and projects keeping in mind the need for a regional focus and orientation'. They also thought that none of the above



could take place without changing mind-sets and finding the conviction to take meaningful decisions.

Nevertheless, the Summit was not all negatives. It brought forth many thought-provoking ideas from the South Asian leadership. These were evoked from their common awareness that peace, progress and prosperity could not be achieved without poverty reduction within the region.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh of India presented the meeting with some interesting ideas. Important among these were- the need to not only pool resources to deal with natural calamities but also to use innovative approaches for reducing the impact of disasters through community involvement in planning and risk management and the need to study means for increasing connectivity within the region by removing 'the barriers to the free flow of goods, of peoples and ideas'.

Both these suggestions reflected a certain specific trend in thought. In the first case it pointed out that the rest of South Asia could learn from Bangladeshi civil societies and the mechanism they had adopted in the tackling of post- disaster situations. The second was consistent with the premise that there was need for cross border cooperation and establishing of linkages.

This idea became the springboard for the Indian Prime Minister's suggestion seeking reciprocal transit facilities all over South Asia. In a manner of speaking he was throwing down the gauntlet. Not surprisingly, the Pakistani Prime Minister responded to such a suggestion with caution. For Pakistan, movement of

goods through trans-shipment at Karachi port or overland from Afghanistan to India was acceptable. However the use of land routes from India through Pakistan to a third destination was dependent on removal of other bilateral irritants. The reaction of Bangladesh, quite expectedly, was also non-committal. Individual state interests came to the fore.

Manmohan also raised the stakes with his proposal that India was willing to offer to all SAARC neighbours, on a reciprocal basis, and without prejudice to existing rights, the prospect of increased facility of daily air services by designated air lines. This was an important step.

Unfortunately, it did not gain spirited acceptance from the other countries. The Indian delegation also floated the idea of establishing a South Asian University as a center of excellence. This was slightly difficult to understand given the fact that there already exists a South Asian Human Resources Development Center. This suggestion has however opened a new dimension among analysts- the possibility of creating a common curriculum throughout South Asia in certain technical subjects. Such an initiative might eventually result in greater connectivity among students and academics within the region.

The other feature that attracted a great deal of attention was India's query about movement forward regarding the functioning of the SAARC High Economic Council which had been recommended at the past July Ministerial meeting. Analysts had hoped that attention would have been paid to this during the Summit. However, that was not to be.

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz leading his country's delegation in the absence of President Pervez Musharraf, also played an important role. While stressing on the need for strengthening regional cooperation for better preparedness and effective management of natural disasters, Shaukat Aziz pointed out that South Asia remained mired in poverty and preoccupied with differences and conflict. He however also underlined the need to move towards conflict resolution. In this context, promoting cooperation in the field of energy also surfaced. This, in a manner of speaking was a nudge of sorts to Bangladesh.

The other South Asian leaders also mentioned about the need for greater cooperation and coordination in the monetary and fiscal policies of SAARC Member States to promote future economic integration. Emphasis was also given on improvement of infrastructure, especially regional transportation and communication links. One hopes that in the near future something concrete can be done in this regard.

Everyone also agreed on the urgent initiation of SAFTA and its prospective benefits. This commonality in spirit will have to be reflected in common political will pertaining to the compensatory mechanism and agreement on sensitive lists. Without this it will be meaningless.

It was also encouraging to note how all Members agreed on the expansion of the Association. The inclusion of Afghanistan and the according of Observer status to China and Japan will now have to be carried forward. It might be worthwhile for the SAARC

leadership to seriously consider widening this list of Observers by including regional organisations like the European Union, ASEAN, OECD, ECO, the Gulf Coordination Council and extra-regional states like the USA and Canada. This would help in SAARC being taken more seriously and stop it being taken hostage by some countries. All the countries spoke of the need to tackle terrorism. They also agreed that it was impacting on growth and inhibiting investment. This was a correct assumption. The countries now have to move forward. For this, they have to agree on a common extradition arrangement. Absence of such an agreement will not assist the process. This has to be focussed upon as soon as possible.

Bangladesh, as Chairperson of SAARC faces a daunting task in the months ahead. They have to prioritise and translate into action agreed commitments. They have to overcome the pre-dominance of politics within the economic and social agenda. They have to create a fine balance between cooperation and differing national interests. They have to rid the process of formal rituals and move it towards effective implementation. They have to take the necessary steps to transform the SAARC Secretariat from a mere Post Office to a proper institution. They also have to take the lead in further intensifying economic cooperation through agreements on investment and protection of such investment within the region.

The Bangladesh Government now has to get over the euphoria of having hosted an expensive meeting and focus on unravelling gridlocks.

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## Regional cooperation within SAARC needs shared security perception: A post Dhaka Summit evaluation

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

SAARC political leaders came, spoke and left Dhaka after a two-day Summit. They have issued a 53-point Declaration, known as the Dhaka Declaration. It is good to read it because the Declaration reflects hopes and aspiration of people in South Asia.

But the question is how far the contents of the Declaration will be translated into concrete actions.

Without being unnecessarily pessimistic, I would argue that implementation of the contents of the Dhaka Declaration is not likely to be smooth, partly because security perception is not common to SAARC countries.

States cooperate with each other when they are locked into a broad framework of political, strategic and political relationship. For example, member-states of the European Union have first achieved common political and strategic relationships that have underpinned their economic cooperation.

### REALISTIC ASSESSMENT OF COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

The birth of SAARC was not an easy one. When Bangladesh attempted to convince India and Pakistan of its usefulness in the late 70s, Bangladesh was a suspect by both the countries. India thought that Bangladesh was ganging up against India, while Pakistan considered Bangladesh was playing a "second fiddle" role to India. (In 1981 during the second Foreign Secretaries meeting in Katmandu, as Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal, I had sensed the misgivings about Bangladesh's proposal had not disappeared from the minds of senior diplomats of India and Pakistan.)

It is desirable to be realistic, rather than to be an idealist or starry-eyed. States do not run on moral or idealistic precepts. This doctrine of *realpolitik* was advocated among others by Thucydides, Kautilya, Machiavelli, Cardinal Richelieu and Henry Kissinger.

In my view, some difficulties are likely to crop up in implementing the Dhaka Declaration and they deserve mention.

First, the old mind-set of state-sovereignty is one of the biggest impediments in sharing of national control over certain resources, whether it is trade related or not. For example, energy export is a part of broader economic cooperation that raises the sensitive issue of sovereignty, meaning loss of control over national energy resource.

Second, each nation-state in South Asia has its own "national interests" and any idea or concept of cooperation is tested with that yardstick. The concept of national interests is variable because it changes with the changing circumstances of time. Political, strategic relationship and economic security are included in it.

Third, the most important edifice of cooperation lies in the common perception of security of member-states within the region. ASEAN and the European Union have been successful as regional blocs because they have it.

The question is whether SAARC nations have common or shared political and strategic/security perception. Presently there is lack of such shared perception in South Asia.

To emphasise my point, let me quote what India's Foreign Secretary said on 14 February this year at an address to the India International Centre, New Delhi:

*"The countries in South Asia, while occupying the same geographical space, do not have a shared security perception and hence, a common security doctrine. This is different from EU or ASEAN. In South Asia at least some of the states perceive security threats as arising from within the region."*

Shared or common security perception is absent in South Asia simply because India defines its security in relation to China's military force and Pakistan, in turn, assesses its security situation in the light of India's position.

India's former Defence Minister George Fernandes in May 1998 declared China as the "potential threat number one." This implies that South Asian security is not confined to what occurs in South Asia. It is beyond its borders. South Asia security is based on tri-lateral pillars-China-India-Pakistan.

### WHAT ARE INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN SOUTH ASIA?

Many security experts believe that India's strategic interests are founded on four pillars:

(1) No outside power should intervene or interfere in issues pertaining to South Asia without direct or indirect consent of India.

(2) All bilateral disputes should be settled by mutual negotiations and no third party's interference is desirable.

(3) No neighbouring country should acquire weapons threatening security of India and (4) No close relationship can be built with big powers including China by neighbouring states of South Asia.

For example in 1998, Bangladesh abandoned signing the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US when it perceived India's objection to SOFA, although SOFA is neither a military nor a security arrangement. SOFA relates to an agreed procedure for movement of US troops in the event of natural disasters occurring in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh come within the security parameters of India in the event of a security threat to India. Prime Minister Pandit Nehru in 1950 reportedly declared that "a threat to Nepal is a threat to India and India cannot tolerate any invasion of Nepal from anywhere."

### WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF LACK OF COMMON SECURITY PERCEPTION?

The first impact is likely to be on cooperative efforts in a gamut of areas. Economic cooperation, although ideally should be de-linked from political and strategic issues, cannot grow to its full potential in a tense political relationship. For example, before reconciliation, most of Pakistan trade to India went through a third country. Bangladesh does not trade with Israel because of political considerations.

Economic cooperation is not possible in a climate of distrust and suspicion on each other motives and intentions of actions. In South Asia, Kashmir dispute acts as a "poison" in relationship between India and Pakistan and its deleterious impact is visible on other South Asian countries.

### CONCLUSION

It is argued that unless India and Pakistan resolve the Kashmir territorial dispute, it is likely that SAARC will continue to remain hostage to this unresolved issue. The Dhaka Declaration will be discussed but will likely to be clouded by security considerations.

Once the Kashmir dispute is resolved, South Asian nations are likely to have a shared framework of political, security and strategic relationship. In that environment of trust and goodwill, economic relations together with related additional measures will be in place with a view to translating the potential gains in the region. It is a fact of life for political entities, such as nation-states.

Finally, many were disappointed not to witness the presence of President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and of Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wanchuk at the Dhaka Summit. Their participation would have raised the level of the Summit to a greater height. This observation, however, does not minimise the contribution of their able Prime Ministers to the Summit.

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# Indo-Bangladesh relations: Time for re-thinking & reconciliation

ANWARUL HAQUE

SINCE those euphoric days of post-Liberation Bangladesh and traumatic nine months in the pre-liberation period in 1971, the relationship between the two countries has been going through what may be called sweet-sour phases over the period of past 34 years. The reasons for this fluctuating sweet-sour relationship are not far to seek. Both the sides have been blaming each other, for right or wrong reasons, for bringing about, the matters to such a pass. Blame-game apart, it is high time to assess this complex relationship in a dispassionate, pragmatic and objective manner.

### MAIN REASONS FOR SOURING OF RELATIONSHIP

There have been several key factors for complicating this relationship. These include in serial historical order the heinous killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with all the members of his family except Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana, who escaped the murderous bullets of the assassins because they were away from the country on August 15, 1975, to the chagrin of Indian authorities, which allegedly used to boast, "Nothing happens in Dhaka without our knowledge". Naturally, the toppling of a friendly government through a bloody coup with the

alleged involvement of CIA was not at all to the liking of the Indian government.

Since those traumatic events and subsequent coups and counter-coups in quick succession leading to the assumption of power by the Deputy Army Chief Major-General Ziaur Rahman on November 7, 1975, the country was in a melting pot fearing another Indian intervention-imagined or real. That fortunately did not happen, to the immense relief of everybody concerned.

But the advent of Ziaur Rahman to the state power was looked upon with suspicion by the Indian authorities. Accordingly, the relationship started deteriorating. Firstly, because it was initially a martial law regime, which was given a civilian face later. Secondly, because the official Indian attitude perceptively changed to active hostility through increased border incursions and skirmishes and overt and covert support to the Chakma insurgents in the Hill Districts. Besides, since the commissioning of Farakka Barrage through a subterfuge in 1974, the flow of Ganges water into Bangladesh started getting less and less, leading to the Long March of veteran octogenarian leader Moulana Bhasani in vociferous protest against the unilateral withdrawal and diversion of Ganges water at the Farakka.

Such unfriendly acts on the part of

**Our clear message is: Let us get over our past prejudices and mutual suspicion for improving mutual understanding and cooperation for the greater benefit of the teeming millions of both the neighbours. Let us look forward to it with renewed hopes and aspirations. We really do want to live in peace like any other nation.**

India, which contributed to the partial desertification of our northern region and increased salinity of sweet water rivers in the southern Bangladesh, certainly did not endear India to the general masses of the country.

During Ershad's autocratic rule, the Indo-Bangladesh relationship started thawing gradually, leading to a friendlier Indian attitude. It again started getting cold with the coming to power of Khaleda Zia through a countrywide general election, held after more than a decade. Apparently, the coming to power of Khaleda Zia's BNP, which was the creation of late President Ziaur Rahman, was not to the liking of the Indian government. There seems to be a kind of BNP allergy in the Indian mindset. Otherwise, how can one explain the expeditious signing of the 25-Year Indo-Bangladesh Water Treaty with the Hasina government and also conclusion of a Peace Treaty with the Chakma insurgents of the Hill Districts, that was solved with the blessings of the Indian government.

Significantly, after Hasina's return

to the country from exile in Indian on May 17, 1981, a popular sitting president Ziaur Rahman was killed, in another army coup, at Chittagong Circuit House on May 30, 1981 - only 13 days later. After that Ershad came to power by illegally ousting an elected president, Justice Sattar, through the Machiavellian machinations of a sitting army chief. Since then, Bangladesh's relations with India started getting better and warmer gradually. In course of time, Ershad paid several visits to Delhi and even succeeded in renewing the Water Treaty with India. But that treaty remained in limbo during Khaleda Zia's first term as Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996. India has repeatedly used Farakka Barrage as an instrument to pressure Bangladesh for its alleged intransigence. Now another Indian initiative, to inter-link Northern Indian rivers, if implemented will be another death trap for Bangladesh. Such blatant and unilateral withdrawal and use of common river waters is bound to jeopardise the whole eco system of the

whole eastern region of two eastern Indian states as well as that of Bangladesh. There are scores of big and small common rivers whose waters are drained down into a 'funnel' called Bangladesh. Being a comparatively weak lower riparian it cannot but express its deep resentment over this vital issue of common-river water sharing on an equitable basis.

### THE MAIN IRRITANTS

Apart from river waters and frequent border clashes between BDR and BSF, a huge trade gap of over a billion dollars between the two neighbours, proposed land transit to India's seven-sister states in the northeast, proposed gas pipeline through our territory from Myanmar, rampant smuggling of Indian goods, illegal arms, harbouring and protecting of our top terrorist, Indian refusal to hand over border enclaves like Bherbari, Angurpota and Dahagram despite our handing over the Indian enclaves, anti-Bangladesh propaganda in a section of Indian

media, large scale smuggling, of cattle heads from India and diesel fuel, fertilizer, imported foreign electronic goods from Bangladesh are causing serious strains in the relationship between the two neighbours.

All these irritants can be removed in a friendly spirit of give and take. But one feels Indian intransigence on certain vital issues like river-water sharing, the narrowing of the huge trade gap, unnecessary border clashes etc, seem to have come in the way of improving the relations. Being a big neighbour and a regional superpower to boot, the Indians can afford to show a little more generosity, more friendliness and good neighbourliness to its small eastern neighbour.

If the South Block's 'policy-makers' discarded the previous mindset of treating Bangladesh in a condescending manner, it might yield far better, far more satisfactory results in settling outstanding and contentious issues.

We have fought a bloody 9-month long War of Liberation, and won it, of

course, with Indian military and material help. But let us not forget that without the help of our intrepid, spirited and fearless freedom fighters, who softened and prepared the ground for the Indian army, it would not have been possible to deliver that last telling blow which forced 90,000 Pakistani troops to surrender to the allied forces. For that reason alone India wanted us to be eternally grateful, and as a nation we are not ungrateful either. But let us not forget that gratitude can never be a one way traffic.

Let us not forget also that the creation of Bangladesh allowed India to settle an age-old score with their arch enemy- Pakistan. The military solution was found to be cheaper than maintaining a huge number of refugees on the Indian soil. Obviously, the political windfall of the emergence of independent Bangladesh was mutual, reciprocal and its long term effect was more far-reaching than her wildest expectations in terms trade and other benefits. However, the euphoria concerning Bangladesh did not last long, primarily because of lack of farsightedness of the Indian trading class and lop-sided and myopic policies of its foreign policy experts.

As stated earlier, the attitude of the Indian commercial class was deeply resented by most Bangladeshis. They did not fight a bloody War of Independence to get another set of exploiters replacing the Pakistanis.

That was the beginning of anti-Indian feeling, which still persists, mainly because of India's big brotherly and hegemonistic attitude. We have no quarrel with the Indian people, our resentment is largely against the Indian ruling and business class which has tried to dominate us.

The arrogance of power, which is the hallmark of the monolithic American superpower, should not be the credo of the Indians who have totally abandoned their much-admired policy of non-alignment for a military alliance with the most unpopular superpower the world has ever seen. This is looked upon with suspicion in Bangladesh.

We may be poor in material resources and wealth, but we are enterprising enough to be role models for other nations concerning poverty alleviation. Our record of making headway in the rural economy through small entrepreneurs is something in which we can take genuine pride.

Our clear message is: Let us get over our past prejudices and mutual suspicion for improving mutual understanding and cooperation for the greater benefit of the teeming millions of both the neighbours. Let us look forward to it with renewed hopes and aspirations. We really do want to live in peace like any other nation.

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