

SAARC

Rethinking Cooperation in South Asia

Tariq Karim addresses the need to change the paradigm from conflict mitigation to integrated development on a sub-regional basis

TWENTY-three years after it was established, despite over-ambitious pronouncement by some leaders about aiming for a Saarc Union and Saarc common currency, Saarc has not achieved much substantially anywhere in the same scale as the EU or the Asean that inspired its formation.

Regrettably, the Saarc process has been held hostage by: the continuing India-Pakistan hostilities that tend to marginalise every other aspect of intra-regional activity, a fortress mindset shaped by the colonial legacy of mutual mistrust, and an over-arching fear on the part of smaller countries of their perceived over-bearing domination by India, and requirement of unanimity in all Saarc decision-making.

In order to realise the vast but yet untapped potential of the region, some other approach is desperately needed now.

What Other Way?

In both the EU and Asean, progress was achieved incrementally. This helped in initial confidence-building and increasing mutual trust.

European co-operation started with six members in three bodies, and then more joined in and areas of cooperation also enlarged. Even now, not all members participate in all projects.

In Asean, the first decade and a half were devoted to solidifying confidence in each other and the process. The pragmatic approach in both processes was: initially, to do what is doable and build confidence