

## **SAARC NEW DELHI SUMMIT: AN APPRAISAL**

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The just-concluded New Delhi Summit (3-4 April) appears to have injected a new dynamism in the body of SAARC. This is evident from the speeches made by all the eight leaders of SAARC at the Summit.

One golden thread seems to run through all the speeches that they have to do something with SAARC moving ahead, not stagnant as before. This is good news.

In the past, SAARC had become too much of a talking (and arguing) shop and too little of a practical doer. The past Declarations of the Summit were heavy on broad statement of goodwill and cooperation but short of concrete solutions to burning issues facing South Asia.

Some say if the money, spent for holding in great pageantry the past thirteen summits in different capitals, would have been targeted for development, it would have had a great impact on poor.

The tradition of “sitting, meeting, and eating” of SAARC leaders appears to have been abandoned in New Delhi. For example, two agreements---one on forming a SAARC Food Bank, and the other on setting up a South Asian University in India—were signed in the presence of the SAARC leaders.

*New member and observers at the Summit:*

The New Delhi Summit was the first in which Afghanistan participated as a full member. China, Japan, US, European Union and South Korea attended as associated observers to SAARC. Iran has been welcomed to be associated observer at the next summit.

The attendance of observers demonstrates that SAARC is being taken seriously as a regional forum by development partners. It is a region of 1.4 billion people with large natural resources. It connects the Middle East and the South East Asia. The Indian Ocean that stretches from the sands of Egypt to the Straits of Malacca stands at the centre of South Asia.

Poverty, weak state institutions and internal disturbances pose threat to security and democracy. They are also source of many of world's problems from civil war to drugs and terrorism. No doubt peace, progress and stability of this region are of strategic importance to development partners and they want to help, assist, and cooperate in the march of economic and social development of the region.

*New Delhi Declaration:*

The 30-point New Delhi Declaration dealt with, among others, inter-regional connectivity, multi-modal transport system, millennium development goals, SAARC Development Fund, energy development, terrorism, SAFTA, environment and global climate change, multilateral trading system, women's empowerment, SAARC Food Bank.

The New-Delhi Declaration is a forward-looking document and progress on each item needs commitment and cooperation from all states. The items mentioned in the Declaration are quite relevant and comprehensive for peace and progress.

*Unilateral action of India: sign of a breakthrough:*

India's long-standing policy of strict reciprocity seems to have been put aside this time and adopted the "Gujral doctrine" in respect of its neighbours.

India's former Prime Minister in his book titled "A Foreign Policy of India": (1998) writes: "The Gujral doctrine, if I may call it so, states that first with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, we do not ask reciprocity but give what we can in good faith".

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, in an address to SAARC Summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced unilaterally concession to South Asian neighbours without reciprocity as follows:

"As an immediate step, India is announcing a unilateral liberalization of visas for students, teachers, professors, journalists and patients from SAARC countries.... India is ready to accept asymmetrical responsibilities, opening her markets to her South Asian neighbours without insisting reciprocity. I am happy to announce today that we will allow duty-free access to India before the end of this year to our South Asian neighbours who are Least Developed countries and further reduce the sensitive list in respect of these countries."

The Least Developed countries in South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal. Already it has been reported that a list of goods is being sent from Bangladesh to India for obtaining this facility.

India has shown unilaterally to its neighbours that it is willing to provide concessions without reciprocity. This is appropriate for India, being the largest country, endowed with huge natural and human resources in the region.

For example, India is the seventh largest exporter of food grains in the world. The surging economy is complemented by a stock market surge that saw index value up to a third and by 200% per cent since 2001, low external debt and large foreign exchange reserves (more than US\$100 billion).

Such unilateral concessions were overdue from India. Other neighbouring countries must in return give what they possibly can with a view to making SAARC on a path of a new journey with a new commitment and with a new identity.

*Strained Indo-Pakistan relations: Impact on SAARC:*

The key to implementation of items covered by the New Delhi Declaration lies largely in the state of Indo-Pakistan relations. India and Pakistan have been circling each other on a number of issues. Some say they are like un-reconciled Siamese twins.

If relations continue to remain distrustful, implementation of these loft ideas of the Declaration is likely to be unfulfilled. That means transition from declaratory phase to action and implementation will face difficulties.

The core issue that generates mistrust is the Kashmir dispute. No amount of good words will wash away Pakistan's concern on Kashmir and one important dynamics is that Pakistan lacks power to force the issue with India. It feels frustrated and pursues non-cooperative attitude to India.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, ahead of his visit to New Delhi, indicated that the resolution of the Kashmir issue was a "must" for SAARC to realize its full potential. In diplomatic language, it means unless Kashmir issue is resolved, SAARC will limp and will fall short of its goal.

Indo-Pakistan ties have been victim of vicissitudes of a relationship that progresses in fits and starts. Although talks are in progress at different levels through back channels and diplomatic dialogue, the two sides have made little headway over Kashmir. President Musharraf toyed with some innovative ideas on Kashmir issue but India does not seem to be interested in them.

Domestic politics has led Pakistan to refuse in giving India most-favoured nation trading status. This is one of the reasons that have kept intra-regional trade at about 5% per cent of South Asian nation's total trade (25% within ASEAN and 50% within European Union). During 2003, Bangladesh's export to SAARC nations stood only 1.85% per cent of its total exports.

Furthermore, nearly all countries are facing some sort of internal turbulence. Islamist violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, ethnic clashes in Nepal and the raging civil war in Sri Lanka are likely to keep these countries occupied. Collective cooperation seems to be difficult under this uneasy internal environment.

*Conclusion:*

Political relations cannot be totally separated economic relations. A close interdependence between political and economic relations has been widely recognized.

The development of Indo-Pakistan relations could not be completely free of the historical legacy of the past conflicts in the region.

Both sides including the foreign policy establishments could not shed their old attitudes and suspicions. A new mind-set of both sides is imperative to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Only then, political observers believe SAARC can move forward meaningfully under the chair of India.