

CORE MEMBER AND THE SUCCESS OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: A STUDY OF INDIA'S ROLE IN SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

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ABSTRACT

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has failed to realize its potential in terms of regional trade and connectivity. In this regard, India, the core state of the organization, occupies an important role that is crucial to the future success and failure of SAARC in the realization of its stated objectives. The study attempts to analyze Indian relations with its neighbors before or after the creation of SAARC in 1985 and to see whether any change in its attitude is noticed or not towards its neighbors in the said periods. The research is qualitative and based on secondary data collected from books, journals, and newspapers. Thematic analysis is applied to analyze the data. To conclude, India has shown little flexibility in its behavior towards its neighbors, even after the establishment of SAARC in 1985. India should demonstrate generosity to settle issues with its neighbors if it wants to diminish small states' apprehensions towards the big brother. Accommodation of small state interests by India can lead SAARC to realize its potential in trade and commerce, like ASEAN and the European Union.

Keywords: SAARC, Regional, India, Core, Trade.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

The idea of a Asian political unity can be traced back to post –World War 11 period when the occupied nations divided along racial ,linguistic and religious lines wished to forge a united front against their colonial masters. The congress leaders even in 1928 passed a resolution calling for the establishment of Asian Federation. In the beginning of 20th century, Indian leaders regarded the adjacent areas as culturally and politically nearer because these as the south East Asian region were geographically nearer to them for very long time. The Indian leaders including

Jawahar Lal Nehru believed that colonial powers had unnecessarily erected walls between Asian societies and these would come down crumbling to the benefit of common Asian people once these powers left Asia. This thinking inspired the holding of Asian Relations Conference and conference on Indonesia in 1947 and 1949 respectively. These efforts were guided by empirical and normative goals. Normative goals included regional peace, stability and order while pragmatic objectives included national autonomy and economic development (Sridharan, 2009).

The ARC had taken place at Delhi. It was mainly the product of Nehru's vision .it was aimed at Asian unity. Care was taken to include only non-controversial goals and items in its agenda which included freedom movements, economic development, migration and racial problems. India tried its best not to give the impression that all these efforts are made only to get a leading role in Asian politics. The organizers also tried not to give the impression that the gathering was aimed at a particular race or region (Sridharan, 2009).

The next Asian gathering was prompted by the second Dutch police action in Indonesia. It passed three resolutions. The first one condemned the Dutch action and asked the UN to effectively intervene to allay the sufferings of Indonesian people. The second urged the participating nations to coordinate their efforts on Indonesia in UN. The third asked the participants to work for the possibilities of establishment of regional organizations with in their regions (Jain, 2005).

The next Asian meeting was the Bandung Conference convened in 1955. Majority of newly independent states of Asia and Africa attended the meeting. Indonesia had convened it. The participants seemed divided on a number of issues. It discouraged the holding of such a large meeting again. These efforts could not bear fruits in the form of a widely established Asian organization. Apart from many causes, the failure was caused by the fears of smaller Asian states who feared Indian or Chinese domination in the absence of a colonial power. This prompted New Delhi to stride carefully lest it be looked at as potential regional leader. The Indian leaders abhorred block politics and wanted to pursue independent foreign policy. It had before it two choices to align itself with UN and Commonwealth. However states in south East Asia moved on and were able to form a limited regional organization namely ASEAN IN 1967. INDIA was not included in it. India was also getting upset with the idea of a regional organization as West had started looking at every gathering as an opportunity for the formation of a potential block. So Indian exclusion from ASEAN was not taken as a shut off call in Indian diplomatic circles (Sridharan, 2009, pp. 103-106). The idea of the establishment of a regional organization in south Asia was mainly mooted by

the Bangladeshi president, Ziaur Rahman. His efforts are traced back to the his visit to India in 1977 and meetings and discussion with then Indian Prime Minister Moraji Desai on the need of establishing a regional organization in South Asian region. He had also welcomed the speech delivered by Nepalese king Birendra to Colombo plan consultative committee that had met in Kathmandu in December 1977, where he had advocated for the need of regional cooperation towards sharing river waters. He had also discussed informally the idea of regional cooperation with south Asian leaders during the Commonwealth Summit in 1979 in Lusaka and the Non Aligned Summit in Havana in 1979.he also visited Sri Lanka in November, 1979 and discussed the idea of regional organization with his Sri Lankan counterpart, J.R.Jayawardene. Furthermore president Ziau Rahman wrote a letter to heads of states and governments of Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka stressing the need for regional cooperation in the fields of economy, science and culture. He believed that only institutional arrangement could materialize this cooperation. He also proposed a Summit level meeting for the dream to be realized. Before the establishment of regional organization in 1985 in Dhaka, a series of meetings took place at foreign secretaries and foreign ministers level in the early 1980s to prepare the ground for formalizing the establishment of regional organization namely South Asian Association for Regional Organization (Sattar, 2010, pp. 337-338).

Factors that Prompted the Establishment of SAARC

Following factors influenced the thinking of Ziau Rahman who spearheaded the efforts for establishing regional organization. These included: political leaders in states got changed and new leaders exhibited signs of accommodation for regional cooperation; Ziau Rahman wanted to give legitimacy to his military rule after a successful coup de'tat through the Indian support; almost all south Asian states were suffering from balance of payments deficits; further protectionism by developed states and the failure of North-South dialogue; US President Jimmy

Carter and British Prime Minister James Callaghan assured to assist joint ventures with regard to water distribution of rivers namely Brahmaputra and Ganga; security threats to South Asia arising out from USSR military intervention in Afghanistan in December, 1979 (Jain, 2005, p. 59).

Aims and Objectives of SAARC

According to its charter basically the south Asian association for regional cooperation which includes Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, srilanka was designed to be a forward looking organization aiming at regional economic cooperation and integration. The objectives of the organization as enshrined in its charter are:

- To accelerate and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia.
- To contribute to develop mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's issues
- To promote and develop mutual assistance among the member states in social, cultural, technical, scientific and economic fields
- To look for developing cooperation with other developing countries
- To develop common voice in international for an on issues affecting all members of the association.
- To look for cooperation with other regional organizations having common aims and purposes (Iqbal, 2006, pp. 133-134).

The principles mandating cooperation among the member states include sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, noninterference in internal affairs of the member states and mutual benefit. Bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from discussion taking place at SAARC. Decisions are taken on issues on the basis of unanimity and not majority. The association was hoped to complement bilateral and multilateral relations among eight members of SAARC (Iqbal, 2006).

Organizational Structure

SAARC Secretariat

The SAARC Secretariat is situated in Kathmandu, It is responsible to coordinate and monitor

implementation of activities, prepares for and services meetings. It serves as a channel of communication between the Association and its member states as well as other regional organizations.

The Secretary General, who is appointed by the Council of Ministers from member countries in alphabetical order for a three-year term, heads the Secretariat. H.E. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon of Sri Lanka assumed office of the Secretary General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on 01 March 2020. After completion of his three years term, he will be succeeded by another person from another member country in alphabetical order. The previous Secretaries General were from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The next Secretary General is to be from Bhutan. Seven Directors on deputation from member states assist the Secretary General. The SAARC Secretariat and member states observe 8 December as the SAARC Charter Day (SAARC Specialized Bodies, 2016).

SAARC Regional Centers

Since 1989, a number of Regional Centres with specific mandates have been established to strengthen and promote regional cooperation. The Regional Centres implement programme activities and are expected to evolve into Centres of excellence in their respective areas. These Centres are managed by Governing Boards comprising representatives from all the Member States, SAARC Secretary-General and the Ministry of Foreign/External Affairs of the Host Government. The Director of the Centre acts as Member Secretary to the Governing Board, which reports to the Programming Committee (SAARC Specialized Bodies, 2016).

SAARC Agriculture Centre (SAC), Dhaka

The was established in in 1989 to provide timely access to information and knowledge resources to all agricultural practitioners of the SAARC member countries to increase agricultural productivity in the member countries by adopting appropriate information and communication technologies, management practices and standards (SAARC, 2020).

SAARC Energy Centre (SEC), Islamabad

It was established in 2006 and was mandated to formulate the vision for the economic growth and development of the South Asia region by initiating, coordinating and facilitating regional as well as joint and collective activities on energy. SEC would provide technical inputs for the SAARC Working Group (and other) meetings on Energy, and will facilitate accelerating the integration of energy strategies within the region. It was expected to provide the member states with relevant information, state-of-the-art technology and expertise in order to make the regional energy connectivity dream realizable (SAARC, 2020).

SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC), Colombo, Sri Lanka

This center was established in 2009 with the mandate to promote regional unity through cultural integration and intercultural dialogue. It aims to contribute towards preservation, conservation and protection of South Asia's cultural heritage within the framework of the SAARC Agenda for Culture.

SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC), Kathmandu

This center was established in 1992 with the mandate to prevent and control Tuberculosis in the region. It tries to coordinate efforts of the National TB Programs of Member States; exchange of information, research, capacity building and implement activities. It collects, collates, analyses and disseminates information on the latest developments and findings in the field of tuberculosis in the region and elsewhere (SAARC, 2020).

SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC), India

This Centre was re-established in November 2016 for expanded role by merging four erstwhile SAARC Centres viz. (1) SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC – New Delhi, India); (2) SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC – Dhaka, Bangladesh); (3) SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC Thimphu, Bhutan); (4) SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC Male, Maldives). It is mandated to

support Member States in their Disaster Risk Reduction initiatives through application of Science & Technology, knowledge from multiple disciplines, exchange of best practices, capacity development, collaborative research and networking in line with the Global Goals and other relevant frameworks adopted by Member States (SAARC, 2020).

Areas of Cooperation among the Member States as per SAARC Charter

The areas include human resource development and tourism, agriculture and rural development, environment, natural disasters and biotechnology, economic, trade and finance, social affairs, information and poverty alleviation, energy, transport, science and technology, education, security and culture (Iqbal, 2006).

Achievements of SAARC

President Ziaur Rahman's thinking might have been influenced by potential for mutual benefits at political, economic, security level when he was making efforts to establish a regional organization in South Asia. It has at least enabled the leaders of south Asian states to meet regularly and to informally discuss mutual issues and problems. Given past South Asian history where summit level interactions were rare since the end of colonial power in the end years of first half of twentieth century, the opportunities for leaders of states to meet regularly at SAARC was not a mean achievement. Informal talks among the leaders at SAARC meetings have eased tensions among the states, resulting in tangible outcomes among the member states. For example, informal talks between Pakistani and Indian prime ministers at the second SAARC summit meeting at Bangalore in November 1986 led to the diffusion of tensions between the two states on the issue of India's military exercise, operation Brasstacks that was going on near Pak-India border. Likewise the India-Sri Lanka talks at the 1987 SAARC foreign ministers' meeting resulted in agreement between the two on Tamil issue. Similarly Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Nawaz Sharif informally met at Davos (Switzerland) 1992 and discussed matters of bilateral interest. The meeting resulted in

Pakistani government action to stop the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front from crossing Line of Control in Kashmir later that year.

The Davos agreement was possible as a result of informal agreement between the two states at the SAARC Summit which took place as a sixth summit meeting at Colombo in December 1991. For the first time, the heads of state agreed in the ninth SAARC summit that informal political consultations would go a long way to strengthen efforts for peace, stability and socio-economic cooperation in the region. The leaders reiterated this intent during their Tenth and Eleventh Summits in Colombo and Kathmandu respectively also (Iqbal, 2006, p. 138).

The member states signed SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) in 1993 followed by four rounds of trade negotiations. The member states agreed to sign south Asian Free Trade Area in January, 2004 during the 12th Summit held in Islamabad, Pakistan. The agreement aimed to move the region towards a South Asian Economic Union.

The Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed in 1993 and four rounds of trade negotiations have been concluded (Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 2008). With the objective of moving towards a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU), the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was signed during the Twelfth Summit in Islamabad in January 2004. SAFTA entered into force by the end of the year 2006. The Association has carried out Regional Studies on trade, manufactures and services, environment and poverty alleviation, SAFTA and Customs matters (Iqbal, 2006, p. 139).

The SAARC Food Security Reserve was established by the member states in 1987 reserve to help the member states in emergencies. Initially its size was 199800 tonnes which was raised to 241,580 tonnes in 2002. The SAARC region with a population of 1.788 billion people requires 244 million tonnes food grain. The reserve at Bank has now jumped to 486,000 tonnes that represents 0.2 per cent of the total requirement. Pakistan doubled its contribution in wheat to the Bank from 40000

to 80000 which was announced in January, 2019 (Ahmed, 2019).

SAARC development Fund was approved by the member states in 2010. It finances the projects that are key to improve standard of living, socio-economic growth and poverty alleviation in the member states (Muhammad Muzaffar, 2017).

South Asian University: The idea of a South Asian University was put forward by an indian PM in the 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka in 2005. Its aim was to facilitate some students of the member states to provide them excellent educational environment in learning and research. The university project was finally approved in the 16th SAARC Summit held in Thimpu in 2010. It is functioning well (South Asian University, 2023).

SAARC Arbitration Council: the idea of SAARC Arbitration Council was initiated in the 13th SAARC Summit held at Dhaka in November, 2005. It started its operations in 2010 at Islamabad when its first Director General was appointed. It settles the disputes as referred by the member states and its people on issues related to industry, banking, commerce, trade and investment (SAARC Specialized Bodies, 2016).

South Asian Regional Standards Organization was established in the 15th SAARC Summit. It aims at promoting cooperation among the member states in the fields of metrology and accreditation. The agreement became functional on August 25, 2011 (SAARC Specialized Bodies, 2016).

Failures of SAARC

South Asian nations have engaged in economic relations with each other since long however the quest to economically integrate the region was hampered by the issues and disputes resulting from colonial rule. The potential is great as one fifth of the humanity resides in South Asia. According to a 2018 World Bank report on trade among the South Asian nations, India and Pakistan collectively represented 88 per cent of the total GDP of South Asia but the trade between the two stood at \$ 2 billion while the bank predicted the potential at \$ 37 billion between the

two. The intra-regional trade is hardly 5 per cent while it is 50 per cent in East Asia and Pacific regions (Regional Trade, 2022).

It is true that most of the programs and achievements of SAARC exist on paper. The much talked about SAARC Food Security Reserve could not be utilized to meet the needs of Bangladesh during its worst natural disaster in 1991. It is also true that most of its activities are confined to workshops and seminars with little tangible results. These activities may be useful, but they do not address priority areas and lack visibility and regional focus so essential for evolving a South Asian identity. Most importantly, SAARC suffers from an acute resource crunch. Unless the organization is successful in mobilizing funds and technical know-how from outside sources, most of its projects cannot be implemented and, thus, its relevance will remain limited.

India as a core state in SAARC and its Relations with its Members

India is a core state in south Asia. It is largest in population and size in the region. In population it has surpassed China recently. It is seventh largest in the area in the world. Its total land area is 32, 87,263 sq.km. It is 3000 km long and 3000 km wide. Its total coastal border along the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea is 7000 km having immense resources in commercial fishing and mineral wealth. It directly shares its borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. No other country shares its borders with so many states in south Asian region (Jain, 2005).

Initially India was hesitant to be a part of efforts to establish a regional organization. India did not like the reference to security issues in the proposed regional organization. Secondly it feared that the smaller states would come together against the interests of bigger India in various contentious fields of mutual interests and then it would be morally very difficult for India to defend its claims. That is why it entered hesitantly in discussions aimed at creating a regional organization (J.N.Dixit, 2003, pp. 149-150).

India claims that it has tried to maintain a low-profile in SAARC so that it may not be seen as a regional hegemon. Institutional arrangement

illustrates it. For example, India did not object to the establishment of SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, despite the fact that India possessed a far better infrastructure, transportation, communication and more vibrant media and intellectual environment. Likewise it did not insist to have an Indian as the first Secretary General to SAARC rather it agreed to the formula of alphabetical order. Similarly, it allowed the establishment of SAARC Agricultural information Centre at Dhaka in 1988 despite the fact that it leads the other members of the region in agriculture science (Jain, 2005).

On the trade side, the idea for free trade agreement was endorsed at the Eighth SAARC Summit held in New Delhi in 1995. After discussion at expert level among the member states, South Asia Free Trade Agreement was signed at 12th SAARC Summit held in Islamabad. India and Pakistan was asked to reduce their tariffs to 0-5 per cent within seven years beginning in 2006 and the least developed states were to reduce their tariffs to 0-5 percent within 10 years in the same period. Within months India reduced tariffs on imports for SAARC members. However India has failed to delink trade relations from political relations. India, for example, cut off trade links with **Pakistan** after the Pulwama attack that had taken place in February 2019. India quickly withdrew the most favored status it had granted to Pakistan back in 2011 and imposed 200 percent custom duty on its imports from Pakistan. Pakistan reciprocated after August, 2019 Indian revocation of Kashmir special status. Even before the cut off of trade relations between the two, the volume of trade between the two was not impressive as it was hardly 2.56 billion dollar during 2018-19 while the potential of mutual trade between the two is estimated at 37 billion dollar as per World Bank 2019 Report. Low mutual trade is mostly attributed to presence of tariff and non-tariff barriers mostly erected by New Delhi, the so-called big brother at SAARC (Jamal, 2022). India has not shown so far any concession towards Pakistan in its political issues and conflict with Pakistan. Both have failed to resolve their issues including Kashmir, Sir Creek, Siachin, Baglihar and Kishanganga projects, cross border terrorism (Sattar, 2010, pp. 208-218)

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India has even jeopardized the normal functions of SAARC dictated by its animosity to Pakistan. The SAARC Summit, for example, has not taken place since 2014. The 19th Summit scheduled to take place at Islamabad, Pakistan, alleging Pakistan of sponsoring a terrorist attack on its army brigade in Uri, a town in Indian Kashmir (Siddiqui, 2022).

India is having troubled relations with **Bangladesh** whose freedom was helped by it through its military intervention in 1971. India enjoyed good relations with Bangladesh when the latter was ruled by Awami League. However when Bangladesh was ruled by Nationalist Party, the relations got nosedived. India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh in 1971. Both also entered into treaty of friendship, cooperation and peace for 25 years pledging not to interfere in each other domestic affairs. During 1971-1975 the relations reached to a high level with Bangladesh receiving highest aid from India. Indo-Bangladesh relations got a hit when sheikh Mujeeb was assassinated and replaced by the military regime of Ziaur Rahman. Consequently India was posed as regional hegemon and not as a liberator in Bangladeshi politics by all political actors except Awami League. In fact Indian threat was used to rebuild Islamic Bangladeshi identity. The relations did not change much during BNP rule in Bangladesh during 1991-1996. Awami League led government signed water treaty with India, ruled then by Congress, in 1997 for 30 years. However

when BJP came to power in 1998, it hurt the relations between the two. BJP raised the issue of Bangladeshi migrants into India and linked ISI and Al Qaeda towards Bangladesh. BJP also did not give much importance to the killing of 16 BSF soldiers in Priddywah. This plunged the relations further. Relations improved when AL and Congress came to power in Bangladesh and India respectively after 2006 (Islam, 2016).

PM Manmohan Singh visited Bangladesh in 2011 and mooted along with his counterpart the idea of signing an agreement on sharing the waters of Teesta. However Bengal chief minister Mumta Banerjee opposed to the draft treaty proposing 50-50 share. So it did not materialize. Another contentious issue between the two states is over a dam being constructed on river Barak in Manipur. Bangladesh believes that it could negatively impact on environment of its eastern district Sylhet. Likewise in January 2010 PM Manmohan Singh signed a boundary agreement with his Bangladeshi counterpart but it could not be implemented. It also led to souring relations between the two. The bus service between Kolkatta and Dhaka and the hilsa diplomacy has failed to make tangible progress. Finally the protracted boundary dispute was settled amicably in 2015. It boosted trade and Indian investment in Bangladesh. Interestingly Border Land Agreement was ratified by India when BJP was ruling in there. It shows Indian maturity on its relations with Bangladesh. India is sponsoring many projects of rail and road connectivity in Bangladesh (Ever-strengthening India-Bangladesh relations, 2023).

Chittagong Hills Tract Conflict is causing rupture in mutual relations of the two. Bangladesh blames India for supporting the Chakma Shanti Bahini who are fighting the government for greater autonomy for the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. India, in turn, blames Bangladesh for supporting Mizo National Front rebels against the Indian Union. (Lahiry, 2002).

Both are having good trade relations. India is the second largest trade partner of Bangladesh which is the fourth largest export destination for India. Despite the negative impact of Covid-19, the bilateral trade between the two has increased significantly. For example, the mutual trade between the two was \$ 9.69 billion during 2020-

2021; it increased to \$ 16.15 billion during 2021-2022 (Ever-strengthening India-Bangladesh relations, 2023).

The relations are subject to who is ruling in both the countries in terms of political parties. India has failed to develop tension free relations with Bangladesh. Teesta water sharing can still be a challenge for both in the future.

India and **Nepal** have witnessed lot of ups and downs in their relationships despite of the signing of Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 and close cultural, historical and social bonds between the two states along with open border and vital trade links. India has security interests vis-à-vis Nepal and India will be hurt if these are ignored by Nepal. Nepal on the other hand keeps too much developmental expectations from India. And it has a sense that India is not doing much to fulfill its developmental requirements. Nepalese power elite thinks that it is surrounded by a regional giant causing insecurity in Kathmandu. Though there is unique people to people relations between the two unmatched by any other bilateral relations, the fact accepted by Nepalese society. Nepalese domestic politics is based on playing Chinese card against India and promoting Nepalese nationalism on anti- Indian sentiments (Upreti, 2016).

The bilateral issues are usually related to trade, transit, sharing and exploration of river waters and other resources, migration, open borders, etc. Nepal usually remains sensitive about these areas and expects India to be generous and helpful but Indian negative responses at times cause irritation in the bilateral relationships. Nepal also demands the amendment of treaty of peace of 1950 but is not clear as what provisions should be amended. India has also failed to complete its projects in Nepal in time (Upreti, 2016).

India and Nepal share 1800 km open border. Both have border issues as well. Like Bangladesh, India has signed water sharing treaty with Nepal. India has constructed 80-kilometre (50-mile) Lipulekh road in the area claimed by Nepal, it will serve as the shortest route between capital New Delhi and Kailash-Mansarovar, a revered Hindu pilgrimage site in the Tibetan plateau. It is also a shortest trade route between India and China. Nepal protested its construction and inauguration by

India. India like a hegemon went ahead with the project while failing to settle the issue with Nepal amicably (why Nepal is angry over India's new road in disputed border area, 2020). India has failed to develop good relations with Nepal based on mutual trust despite of the fact that the two are enjoying unique cultural and socio-cultural relations.

India shares 700 km border, a visa free regime and duty free trade with **Bhutan**. Free trade agreement was signed in 2006. Bhutan utilizes only 30 percent of its total energy generation. The rest 70 percent is sold to India and it is its biggest export. All 20 districts of Bhutan are accessible by road constructed entirely by Indian Border Road Organization. India has constructed hydro-electric projects, an airport, a cement plant, a broadcasting station, major highways, and electricity transmission and distribution system in Bhutan. It has explored, mapped and surveyed mineral resources in Bhutan. Bhutan has accepted to consult India on its external relations as per a treaty signed between the two in 1949. India also provides security to Bhutan. Indian Military Training Team is based in Bhutan to train Bhutanese forces. India desires to keep Bhutan under its influence that is why it suspects every Chinese investment in Bhutan or Chinese-Bhutanese efforts to settle border demarcation issue (Sarkar, 2012).

So the relations between the two have been tension free and are based on developmental needs of Bhutan and security and strategic needs of India. It has grown over the years before or after the establishment of SAARC.

Indo- **Sri-Lankan** relations have been affected by the Tamil issue in Sri-Lanka. India has followed a two pronged strategy: finding a political solution to the ethnic issue and making it sure that a separate Tamil Eelam is not created. Historically the Tamils came from India to Sri Lanka as laborers on plantations field. Sri Lanka passed a Citizenship Act in 1948 and deprived around 7 lac Indian Tamils from citizenship. India and Sri Lanka signed an agreement to solve Tamil citizenship issue in 1964. However the issue lingered on and is said to be the root cause of Tamil ethnic violence until it was completely curbed in 2009. Indian government supported the

Tamil genuine issues only when electorally strong regional parties in Indian Tamil Nadu after 1977 urged New Delhi to support Tamils in Sri Lanka. The votes of Tamil Nadu regional parties are important for coalition governments at the Centre. India covertly supported Tamil cause after a Tamil pogrom preceded by the killings of 14 Sri Lankan soldiers by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in July, 1983. Indian secret agency Research and Analysis Wing provided the essential support to LTTE to emerge as a well fighting force for the cause of Tamil population in Sri Lanka. India under an agreement sent its forces to Sri Lanka in 1987 to enforce a treaty between Sri Lanka and Tamils. SRI LANKA promised not to give military bases to any other country (Amit Ranjan, 2022).

India provided military support to Sri Lanka to tame Tamils primarily to keep Sri Lanka out of the influence of China and Pakistan. During the quelling of ethnic movement 2006-2009, Sri Lanka committed gross human rights violations. The US moved a resolution in UN to hold Sri Lanka accountable for its human rights violations. India showing restraint did not support the resolution following the principle of non-interference in internal matters of other states. India urged and helped Sri Lanka to reconstruct war ravaged areas in Sri Lanka and advised Sri Lanka to pacify Tamils through political devolution of power (Lahiry, 2002, pp. 77-78).

India financed Sri Lanka for the construction of Northern railway line through a grant amounting to \$ 416.4 million. PM Modi visited the war ravaged zone in 2015 to show solidarity with Tamils. Modi started the construction of cultural center in Jaffna and handed over houses built with Indian aid to war displaced Tamils in Sri Lanka. India assisted Sri Lanka during Corona pandemic 2020-21 by providing medicines, vaccines and oxygen. India tries to keep Sri Lanka away from Chinese influence. PM Modi again visited Sri Lanka in 2017 after a similar visit to Sri Lanka by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2014. The irritants in bilateral relations surface from time to time. Sri Lankan government, for example, cancelled a deal with India and Japan to develop East Container Terminal at Colombo port with Adani group, fearing country wide protests

against the privatization of the port. India objected to it publicly and asked Sri Lanka to abide by its international commitments (Amit Ranjan, 2022, pp. 104-105).

India is mostly dictated by its strategic interests while dealing with Sri Lanka. It has used the Tamil issue to keep Sri Lanka exclusively in its domain. However Chinese influence in Sri Lanka has grown over the years.

Maldives is a small state in SAARC. It is mostly divided along political fault lines. Political leaders target each other once they are in power. The ruling and opposition parties usually look to India for support. It shows Indian involvement in the internal affairs of Maldives. Some parties support active Indian involvement while others oppose it. India dislikes American or Chinese presence in Maldives (Mallempati, 2017).

India has tried its best to exploit to its advantage **Afghanistan** animosity towards Pakistan since August 1947. From 1947 to 1992, India has extended its continuous support to every Afghan government opposed to Pakistan. India signed 'Friendship Treaty' with Afghanistan in 1950. It also had signed multiple agreements and protocols with pro-Soviet regimes in Afghanistan in 1980's. During the Taliban rule 1996-2001, India extended its support to Northern Alliance who were opposed to Taliban rule. India provided it with high altitude warfare equipment worth \$ 10 million through its secret agency Research and Analysis Wing. It also developed close ties with anti-Taliban states like Iran and central Asian republics. India invested on infrastructure development in post-Taliban Afghanistan in \$ billions. It enabled India to develop a soft image for itself among the Afghan people. Pakistan resented it and blamed India for using Afghan territory to destabilize Pakistan. Thus Indian involvement in Afghanistan is mostly motivated to isolate and encircle Pakistan, its neighbor on the western border (Shahzad Akhtar, 2023, p. 111-120).

Conclusion

Indian behavior with majority of its neighbors is dictated by its security interests. It hardly has shown flexibility with its neighbors to settle bilateral issues. It is considered by majority of its

neighbors as regional hegemon. In some countries like Bangladesh, Maldives, Afghanistan, it is liked by one section of political forces while disliked by others. It has failed to develop good relations with its neighbors on mutual respect and equal sovereign status that is why SAARC could not integrate the south Asian region in terms of trade as it needs conducive political atmosphere. Interstate trade among SAARC members is hardly 5% while it is 50 % and 70% among ASEAN and European Union states respectively.

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