

Opening Statement

by

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at

Symposium on Revitalising SAARC

at

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We are here to examine the ways and means to revitalize SAARC in light of the forthcoming summit (Nov. 2014). In my view, three vital questions present themselves, as below:

- i. What is the balance sheet of SAARC today?
- ii. How should we view SAARC in the context of our interpretation of India's national interests? Can India become a truly Great Power even if its neighbourhood lacks peace and stability?
- iii. How should SAARC relate to the extra-regional powers, especially China? What should be our view on the suggestion that China should join SAARC as a member and on other big-ticket proposals like BCIM-Economic Corridor and Maritime Silk Route (MSR)?



Ambassador Rajiv K Bhatia, DG, ICWA giving opening statement.

2. The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 by its seven founding members i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan joined the organisation as the 8th member in the year 2007. During these thirty years, SAARC has prepared a robust intellectual capital for regional cooperation and helped in spreading awareness amongst more than a billion people of South Asia about the value of regional cooperation. The SAARC Charter clearly reflects its priorities and needs which

include promotion of economic and social progress, technological and cultural development within the South Asia region emphasizing self reliance.

3. Member-states have acknowledged the transformation that took place since the 1990s in terms of popular upsurge for democracy, protection of human rights and opening up of global economy. This has promoted the association to adhere to the principles of mutual co-operation and peaceful settlement of disputes. Member states also felt the need to address social and non traditional security issues through SAARC Summits. However, the multilateral progress has been slow in comparison to its performance with other regional organisations like ASEAN and EU.



Symposium in progress.

4. India is the most prominent member of this organisation in terms of territory, population, economic growth and resources. The country's substantial economic growth could act as an anchor for the whole region and make a positive contribution to its development. However, India's geographical area, resources and growth have generated a 'fear factor' among other

SAARC countries. India has largely been perceived as ‘big brother’ or ‘hegemon’ by smaller SAARC members. Further, the borders of India touch those of every other country of the region (including narrow boundary with Afghanistan and maritime boundaries with Sri Lanka and Maldives), whereas no other two countries in the region have common land borders, with the lone exception of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Shared borders have led to all kinds of bilateral tensions in the region and thereby apprehensions within SAARC.

5. All these factors have led to the presence of US and China in the region as most of the neighbouring countries are willing to accommodate the interests of extra regional powers. China’s interest in the region and its growing maritime reach with the help of India’s neighbouring countries is a concern. Strengthening of SAARC based on the Eminent Persons Group’s recommendations and implementing those in the identified areas of cooperation can be an option for more integrated economic and social development in South Asia.



Symposium in progress.

6. The present government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken several positive steps to improve the relationship with neighbouring countries and strengthen SAARC. At his swearing-in-ceremony leaders of all SAARC member countries and Mauritius participated. A proposal for setting up SAARC bank and SAARC satellite was proposed by the Prime Minister. The initiatives proposed need serious consideration among SAARC members as it will provide larger good in larger interest. Therefore, internal problems which can have spill over effects on the entire region's economic and social progress need to be addressed in an incremental manner. SAARC tried to address this aspect to an extent by addressing various pressing social and economic issues in the region, such as drug trafficking, issues affecting girl child, environmental issues and non traditional security issues to name the few.

7. Therefore, in this context there are three fundamental factors which can influence the future of SAARC which are: India's approach; cooperative mindset of neighbours; and their approach towards the regional organisation as well as the evolving role of extra regional powers.

8. In a situation where some of the member countries of SAARC are keen to expand the membership of SAARC, the question arises whether it is feasible to include more members in SAARC and whether it would have any positive effect on the overall performance of SAARC.

9. This Symposium shall try to address issues which are hampering the progress of SAARC and make some constructive recommendations for greater involvement of all the SAARC member states for its revitalization.

10. In short, distinguished experts assembled here are requested to diagnose the issue or the problem, to suggest the remedy, and also to reflect on how to motivate the SAARC governments to accept our collective ideas for the revitalization of the valued institution.

I wish the Symposium all success.
