What A Globalised South Asia Means: A Comparative Study Between SAARC And BIMSTEC

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We cannot fathom the phenomena of this world completely by simply relying or putting our faith on the yardstick of theories of globalisation. It is true that it has given birth to the global community, creating a sense of utter interdependence and responsible management of political affairs. But, it also has led to the emergence of various factions between and around certain regions, intensifying the probability of emergence of conflicts due to economic, militaristic, humanitarian incongruency of ideologies.

On similar lines, it won’t be wrong to be highly conducive of regionalism as a process which is equally dominating and of paramount importance in the wake of the formation of regional organisations and regional societies, along with the globalising tendency of the world. Fortunately for us, the fellows of this civilised society, the global political arena allows for both regionalism and globalism to mutually coexist as well as complement each other in an otherwise competing world to reach a conclusion for the betterment of this world.

The post-World War II period can be marked as initiation of rapid growth in the number of inter-governmental and regional organisations. In fact, to be more precise, according to some erstwhile statistics, regional organisations aimed at carrying out inter-regional operations under the ambit of structural economic growth, resource sharing, and conflict management since 1945, and has drastically increased to outnumber universal organisation by a ratio of 5:1. Though the statistics did come down to a tolerable limit after the end of the Cold War, which saw a tectonic shift in the foreign and sovereign policies of certain major actors.

The concept of regional organisation in world politics is certainly ambiguous and is often defined on the basis of geographical proximity of the member nations, say the European Union. But, the categorisation of the regional organisation is subject to certain limitations, which in turn are very responsible for the integrity of the organisation, for example, India’s temporary membership in ASEAN.

However, the term is best understood and made functional as the part of the globe tied together by a common set of objectives, categorised by geography, society, culture, economy or policy. It inherits a formal structure provided for it in a governmental organisation which is intended to apply to a certain group of nations.

Regionalism In South Asia

A great lot of scholars have made a good attempt on the analysis of levels of regionalism in South Asia. Scholars like Bjorn Hettne applied the word ‘region-ness’ to identify the levels of integration among South Asian countries, in virtue of their geographical proximity. He further classified it into factors of the region as a unit of geography; social set-up of a region; transnational cooperation; regional civil society; and lastly a region as a region-state.

After World War II, the idea of regional organisation was only limited to peace and development in Europe. In fact, this limitation suited well to put the world’s focus to develop Europe once again from the ruins of the war. But, with more incidents popping up in the international arena including the Cold War, the rise of economic powers in Europe, the disintegration of Soviet Union, there was also a rise of new autonomous regional spheres in Asia. The primary idea behind this was to keep Asia out of reach from major western power’s influence and regionalise the security and prosperity of Asia in a new, significant manner (Chibber, 2004).
Therefore, the regional organisations in South Asia have always maintained a functional and efficient approach to cooperate in social, cultural, and fairly non-controversial areas. But, the major hurdle in the progress of regionalism in South Asia has majorly been its inter-state conflicts and the general mistrust among elite nations in South Asia. This has not only stalled major regional organisations, like SAARC, but has deemed them impotent through cyclic criticisms of failure and lack of effect. Yet, beyond that mistrust, there has been credible hope through BIMSTEC, who like SAARC also works on a functional approach, but provides greater regional cooperation and social welfare. Therefore, this paper will compare both SAARC and BIMSTEC, and maybe try to identify as to which regional organisation fares better for the development of South Asia.

The Emergence Of SAARC As An Important Regional Organisation In South Asia

The lingering history of South Asia’s colonial past, uncontrolled human and other movements across porous, unstable borders in the backdrop of rapid formation of new nations states, ethnic and socio-religious differences, intra-regional disparities in the economy and resultant bilateral intimidation and disputes called for the establishment of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) in 1985. Very skilfully at the beginning itself, its charter swiftly ruled out “bilateral and contentious issues” from its agenda as a protective clause, in order to give way to multilateralism and avoid single state hegemony.

In the era of regionalism as described earlier, we saw rapid importance of the emergence of regionalism in South Asians with the emergence of SAARC. The wealth of manpower and resources added with other decisive factors like geographical proximity, the commonality of social and political norms of development, and a shared history of colonialism led towards the formation of SAARC. Apart from these trivial ideas, it is important to also take note of the main and necessary ideas behind its formation – which were the promotion of political, economic and
social interactions; the common vision for using the region’s potential, and counter threats from outside forces, keeping it under the ambit of the broad multipurpose regional organisation.

Though successful mainly in the field strictly restricted to educational and humanitarian structure, an overall assessment of SAARC’s performance is marked by negativity and plagued by the failures of conflict resolution between the members themselves. In fact, the security aspect of countering threats from outside forces never took off and was highly contradictory to the fact that SAARC will never discuss contentious issues. Apparently, an organisation with more observer than member states was highly criticised for being stagnant with concrete questions raised against its credibility and sustainability. It is also to note that eleven of SAARC’s annual summits has been declared a failure due to its inability to resolve the agenda in hand.

**Extended Discussion On The Failures Of SAARC**

Unlike the EU or the ASEAN, which were formulated on the foundation of western funds and principles to fight the hegemony of Russia and China, SAARC came into light as a completely unbiased, uninfluenced, indigenous organisation for a genuine need of regional integration, and boasts a concentrated and ambitious effort on socio-economic development. However, despite such statistics which are promising, SAARC has appeared to have failed in re-instating its claim, more than once. Known for promoting intra-regional trade and economic connectivity, the inter-nation trade between SAARC members stands at meager 5%.

SAARC has not been able to achieve its goals due to several factors:

1) It has not been able to increase trade between the member states despite giving a better alternative to Regional Trade Agreement through the advertisement of SAFTA (SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement). Most of the SAARC members rely on an extensive trade with non-SAARC members for their economic sustainability;

2) Building from the first point, most of the SAARC countries have trade partnerships with non-SAARC members, like China, which infuriates its hegemony India, disrupting its activities;

3) SAARC has poorly failed to implement its plans for regional welfare, leaving much of its population below the poverty line, which approximately stands at 30%;

4) Most of the SAARC countries sit at the lowest tier of the Human Development Index, which means they have pathetic access to housing, food, and healthcare due to failed socio-economic conditions;

5) Tensions between member states allow space for external powers to hegemonise South Asian politics. It can be accorded to the fact that most of the primary SAARC member, i.e. Indian and Pakistan rely on western countries for their security and survival;

6) Internal threat from the unavoidable hegemony of India in SAARC, which constantly fuels the animosity between India and Pakistan. India has certainly used its power to forward its hegemonic designs at the expense of SAARC by alienating Pakistan or not allowing China to be a member of SAARC;

7) The lingering and never-ending Kashmir dispute has been a serious hurdle in SAARC’s path to progress as complications arising from the tension often divides the organisation, compelling the members to take sides;

8) Conflict resolution and management, which were supposed to give SAARC an edge over ASEAN have become its lowest moral ground by inviting sensitive bilateral issues, which is against its primary mandate. This clash also hampers its GDP which is a meagre 3%, compared to 23% of ASEAN in Asia. SAARC is drowned time and again in bilateral tensions between SAARC member nations, rather than providing greater security to its members from outside, non-SAARC forces.

**Origin Of BIMSTEC: The Competition Garbed As Cooperative Continuation**

The failure of SAARC and the everlasting clash between India and Pakistan aided by China pushed South Asian actors, including India to push for an alternative. BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral
Technical and Economic Cooperation), arising from a group of nations in the Bay of Bengal (namely Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan), has many a time been favoured as SAARC’s alternative. After gaining further momentum during a mini-summit in BRICS Goa, researchers started developing methodologies to explore the efficacies of BIMSTEC over SAARC.

BIMSTEC originally was given a chance to emerge as a natural platform to test regional cooperation in South Asia following the failures of SAARC. BIMSTEC’s primary focus is on economic and technical cooperation among countries of not just only South Asia but also Southeast Asia, which efficiently divided seven member countries to take lead in fourteen sectors, avoiding internal strife. BIMSTEC’s major win was the division of direct power, hence ruling out the chance of single-party hegemony. In its initiation, it even enhanced its connectivity with ASEAN and kick-started the famous Act East Policy.

In less than a decade, BIMSTEC’s trade reached 6% compared to SAARC’s 5% since 1985. It has been majorly called as an important bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, hence giving it an uncanny edge over SAARC. The stakeholders in both BIMSTEC and SAARC support BIMSTEC as a preferred platform for regional cooperation at a staggering 71% with almost 60% of the stakeholders being hopeful to highly hopeful as an alternative to SAARC.

But, ever since its creation in 1997, BIMSTEC has also not made a significant mark in regional cooperation and suffers from a lack of clear primary mandate. One can argue that it is because BIMSTEC is relatively new. But beyond this, BIMSTEC’s capabilities have been limited to small experimental trade negotiations and summits. It shows that even after having great potential, BIMSTEC’s capabilities are thrown away to waste, and this might have serious repercussions, once SAARC fails completely in the near future.

**Conclusion**

Though the formation of SAARC was a landmark step, the main reason behind its initiation was to develop a conducive environment where all the nations may interact peacefully with shared goals of economic, trade, humanitarian and resource sharing benefits. But neither the South Asian nations have been able to push the process of integration into full swing nor the organisation has been mature enough to promote harmony and economic integration.

Nonetheless, the establishment of BIMSTEC was seen as a landmark step too, which in its initial years very diligently met the expectations put on it. The inter-regional cooperation in BIMSTEC has overshadowed that of SAARC and now stands tough to alienate SAARC in the international South Asian forums. Furthermore, the extension of BIMSTEC’s mandate over relations with ASEAN gives it the much necessary edge it needs to shadow SAARC completely. Therefore, BIMSTEC, if we turn a blind eye to its flip side, stands a better chance of surviving and carrying forward its work as an anarchical regional cooperative system with zero hegemony than SAARC, who as we saw earlier has been marred by preferential treatment and hegemony.

Now, what is left to see is if BIMSTEC will work from where SAARC might leave its imprint or will it be a new regional forum of its own, complete with its own independent mandate. Whatever may the consequence be, the price of alienating SAARC, in the long run, will not be as simple as the actors think. With the dependency on the regional forum for over three decades, the probable future breakup will lead to a huge backlash, especially from China, followed by the creation of a time-taking mandate for BIMSTEC, which threatens to stall any cooperation that might have been forged between South Asian states.

Above all this, regionalism in South Asia does seem to be extensively fragile, and faulty with the mindset and foreign policy of some actors, i.e. India still relying on dependency on the West rather than creating political, economic, social and cultural nexus with its neighbours through credible regional organisations. Moreover, whatsoever is left of regional organisations in South Asia has been used to hegemonise and shape the region according to the whims of one strong regional actor, and it will be wise to say that regional organisations in South Asia won’t flourish until and unless there is a clear demarcation between security challenges and economic welfare among regional actors.

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