



# Lessons for South Asian Integration from the East Asian Experience

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of SAARC came into existence in 1985 eighteen years after the establishment of ASEAN, that is, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Circumstances leading to the birth of these two Asian regional organisations were entirely different. SAARC was born under economic compulsions, and its primary objective since its creation has been to accelerate the process of economic and social development in member states through collective action in agreed areas of cooperation. Since ASEAN was created in 1967 during the Vietnam war, a common threat perception brought together the five Southeast Asian countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand to form an organisation. ASEAN, unlike SAARC, was launched without a Charter, although its Declaration set out the guidelines for ASEAN activities and defined the aims of the organisation. The Association had three basic objectives, namely, to safeguard the political and economic stability of the region against big power rivalry, to promote the economic, social and cultural development of the region through cooperative programmes and to serve as a forum for the resolution of infra-regional differences. The Southeast Asian leaders were equally keen to enhance political and security cooperation and declare the region a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The practice of convening a Summit of Southeast Asian leaders was started with a political objective, that is, with a view to ensuring peace and stability in the region. It was this objective which led ASEAN to oppose the Vietnamese invasion of

Cambodia in the seventies and receive international approbation for its unequivocal stand on foreign aggression.

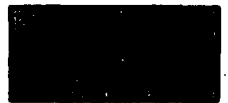
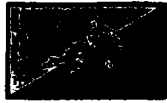
The end of the Cold War in the eighties dramatically altered the existing order of international relations based on the balance of power represented by the two powerful military blocs. ASEAN positively responded to these new developments and changes as it received fresh impetus and thrust from the Fourth 1992 Singapore Summit followed by the Annual Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Manila the same year. The Fourth ASEAN Summit of 1992 declared that "ASEAN shall seek avenues to engage Member States in new areas of cooperation in security matters". A significant initiative of this meeting was a regional security structure or regime to which Vietnam and Laos were not only admitted as observers but they also signed at this meeting the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia. It was a positive step forward in achieving ASEAN's goal of peace and stability, amity and cooperation in the region.

In the recent years, ASEAN, as part of its restructuring exercise, has enlarged its membership and has established itself as a vibrant and resilient regional organization capable of shaping and influencing political and economic relations in the region. The Association has been able to attract the attention of the international community in world forums like the UN by taking a common and united stand on major issues of global and regional concern. The ability to speak with one voice has considerably increased ASEAN's clout. Besides, the Association has been effective in international negotiations because it has been able to take a common position in all forums, such as ASEAN Regional Fo-

rum which discusses political or security issues or APEC and WTO which focus on economic and trade-related issues. ASEAN-APEC relations have also remained cooperative, and ASEAN has indicated no desire to establish a separate trading bloc e.g. East Asia Economic Cooperation (EAEC). Since its inception ASEAN has certainly proved to be a stabilising force or a symbol of peace and stability in the region as it has focused primarily on avoiding conflict and misunderstanding among the member states. To quote Baladas Ghosal, "ASEAN over the last thirty years has evolved a distinct identity of its own, and is becoming more assertive of its Asian values. Its consensus-building and confidence-building approach in managing regional conflicts still has been bringing results and should be relevant for other regions". This is an important lesson for South Asian integration.

The 1967 ASEAN Declaration issued at the time of launching the Association established a basic framework for common action to promote regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. In the 1976 Declaration of Concord ASEAN reaffirmed its commitment to amity and cooperation in Southeast Asia. Political rather than economic cooperation has dominated the ASEAN agenda since its establishment in the sixties. During the post Cold War period, as stated earlier, ASEAN has moved forward decisively on political and economic fronts. Southeast Asia is no longer divided today between anticommunist and socialist countries or ASEAN and Indochina. The ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC), originally designed as a forum for discussion between six Southeast Asian countries, that is, the five founder members and Brunei and seven dialogue partners from outside the region, namely, Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, US and the EU, to deliberate on economic matters, extended its scope to deal with political and security issues as well. ASEAN has attached considerable significance to its relations with major powers such as China, Russia

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and the US for Southeast Asian security. While the US, has maintained close political, security and economic links with ASEAN since its early days, China and Russia started showing keen interest in establishing close political and economic relations with the Southeast Asian Association only after the end of the Cold War. Since they were not members of PMC as dialogue partners, they were invited to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) created to accommodate them. Even India has been invited to attend the meeting of ARF, which is a significant ASEAN initiative to ensure and promote regional security by involving major powers and other important extra-regional countries. In other words, ARF serves as a multi-lateral consultative forum aimed at promoting preventive diplomacy and confidence building among the states in the Asia-Pacific region.

SAARC could seriously consider creating a forum of this nature, where officials and representatives of South Asian governments could share the same podium with regional and extra-regional powers like China, Japan, Russia, the US and the EU as dialogue partners and discuss with them common issues of vital concern to people in the region with positive implications for regional peace, stability and prosperity. Security is, however, a sensitive issue for South Asia. India and Pakistan, two major countries in the region, have already fought three wars during the last 50 years, two over Kashmir, which has remained unresolved, and each accuses the other of encouraging cross-border terrorism. The Kashmir issue with enormous security implications for regional peace and stability has never figured on the SAARC agenda, since the SAARC Charter excludes bilateral and contentious issues from the deliberations of the Association. As SAARC has come of age during the last 15 years, this provision of the Charter needs to be amended since contentious bilateral issues can no longer be kept out of the SAARC agenda. Prospects of South Asian cooperation on political and security issues looked bleak after

India and Pakistan conducted a series of nuclear tests in 1998, triggering fears of nuclear proliferation in the region.

It is indeed ironic that while the eleventh SAARC summit to have been hosted by Nepal in November 1999 has been indefinitely stalled because of political developments in Pakistan leading to the suspension of dialogue between the leaders of the two countries, both India and Pakistan enjoy good relations with ASEAN as its Sectoral Partners. The SAARC leaders recognise that regional cooperation has a political dimension. During the past 15 years SAARC has had ten summits, and at each summit the South Asian leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation within the SAARC framework based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit. Security cooperation in the region is inconceivable in the absence of mutual trust between the two old South Asian adversaries – India and Pakistan. Despite efforts made by the SAARC member countries to promote mutual trust and understanding between India and Pakistan, which is essential to the attainment of SAARC goals and objectives, mutual distrust continues to be a major impediment to regional cooperation in South Asia. Dr B P Shrestha of Nepal, one of the eminent persons involved in preparing the GEP Report on SAARC; Vision beyond the year 2000 makes the following perceptive observation:

“Regional cooperation does not gain momentum by its own force unless it derives its motive power from mutual trust and understanding of its partners. The environment, which is conducive to regional cooperation, can be vitiated by unsettled and resolved problems. No problem is, however, incapable of peaceful resolution with necessary political will. . . . Leaders of vision and statesmanship do not remain captive of the past. They view the historical events and legacies against the dynamics of the changing environment and changing relations. The SAARC framework should provide

new opportunities to create in South Asia a constructive process in generating a climate of mutual trust, goodwill and harmony.

The countries of South Asia have been bound together not only by the age-old cultural, social and historical traditions but also by the common aspirations of their people to live together now and forever, in peace, stability and prosperity. The real test of regional cooperation, therefore, lies in the ability of its leaders to work together to the legitimate expectations and aspirations of more than a billion people in the region”.

The Declaration of the Tenth SAARC Summit held in Colombo in July 1998 categorically states that “the aim of promoting peace, stability and amity and accelerated socio-economic cooperation may best be achieved by fostering good neighbourly relations, relieving tensions and building confidence”. To this end, the South Asian leaders agreed at the same summit to initiate the process of informal political consultations which, it was hoped, would “contribute to the appreciation of each other’s problems and perceptions as well as for decisive action in agreed areas of regional cooperation”. The process of informal political consultations between and among the SAARC member states to resolve political differences has not become operational as the modality for holding such consultations has yet to be worked out. In brief, SAARC has yet to institutionalise itself as a mechanism for ensuring confidence and common understanding in the region through political and economic cooperation. SAARC’s future, as Prof. Y.N.Khanal, a former seasoned diplomat of Nepal, observes succinctly, hinges on the readiness of India and Pakistan to accommodate each other on a “give and take” basis.

Experience has shown that a SAARC summit is postponed if a single member wishes to withhold it. ASEAN leaders need not wait for a summit which takes place every three years



to meet informally or at the unofficial level at least once a year or as frequently as possible. This is one more evidence of ASEAN commitment to regional cooperation. Since the official SAARC process has slowed down for some time, the Track Two processes representing retired government officials, former diplomats academics and representatives from the media and the private sector has become active in recent years to revitalise the SAARC process. Only last December Kathmandu hosted the first ever meeting of the Citizens' Commission for South Asia headed by India's former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral. The official response to this meeting from all SAARC capitals has been encouraging. There is, however, a general feeling that the Track Two process is not a substitute for official meetings at which political decisions are taken to promote regional cooperation with a fresh vision, renewed vigour and imagination. It may be noted that ASEAN has also provision for regular exchange of views on measures to promote regional peace, stability and prosperity through the TrackTwo process, that is, outside the inter-governmental framework. This involves consultations among the non-governmental ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) based on each ASEAN country. ASEAN officials interact, from time to time, with these institutes on various issues.

It is unfortunate that deadlock in the SAARC summit has also affected senior officials' and ministerial meetings. ASEAN on the other had, is moving towards integration, despite different political and economic systems in the ten countries that have joined the Southeast Asian Association as its members and are deeply committed to regional cooperation. In this context, the role played by Indonesia as the largest ASEAN country in terms of size and population in furthering the objectives of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia and contributing to the process of integration is note worthy. In the context of SAARC, India's

centrality in terms of its size, population, natural and human resources and military strength including nuclear capability is a reality that has to be reckoned with. It shares common land borders with most of its neighbours in the region. If the latter feel uncomfortable with India's towering presence in the region, India should take the initiative to assuage the fears of its small neighbours and contribute more positively and actively to programmes and activities aimed at promoting regional cooperation.

ASEAN has evolved over the years and encompasses within its fold the entire Southeast Asian community represented by the 10 countries with their own political and social systems. What SAARC can learn from ASEAN is that it must move forward from its symbolic phase and address itself seriously to developing a community culture in South Asia based on action-oriented programmes of cooperation affecting in concrete terms the life of each member of the community.

#### **ASEAN Economic Cooperation: Lesson for South Asia**

It has been recongnised by ASEAN that political cooperation facilitates economic cooperation. In other words, economic cooperation cannot take place in a political vacuum. Economic cooperation in ASEAN, in recent years, covers a wide range of areas including not only trade liberalisation measures but also trade facilitation and investment promotion activities.

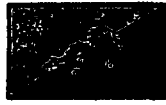
Cooperation in private sector development, small and medium-size enterprises, infra structural development and regional investment promotion measures has also made remarkable progress. The most significant step to promote infra-ASEAN economic cooperation was the decision of the 1992 Summit to establish the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) by the year 2008. Later, the ASEAN member countries agreed to reduce the time frame so that AFTA could become fully operational by 2003. The primary objective of AFTA is

to enhance ASEAN's status as a competitive production base designed to service the global market.

The Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme is the main instrument for making AFTA a reality. Tariffs for all products in the Inclusion List will be reduced under the Scheme. A number of measures such as harmonization of product standards and customs procedures have been and are being undertaken to facilitate infra-ASEAN trade.

Industrial cooperation has been central to ASEAN economic cooperation. Various initiatives such as the ASEAN Industrial Projects (1976), the ASEAN Industrial Complementation (1981) and the Brand - to Brand Complementation (BBC) in 1988 have been taken to enhance the industrial competitiveness of the region. All these schemes are based on the principles of resource pooling and market sharing paving the way to the Basic Agreement on the ASEAN industrial Cooperation (AICO) Scheme in 1997. It is notable that the AICO Scheme which aims at promoting joint manufacturing activities of companies operating in ASEAN has been designed with the active involvement and cooperation of the private sector. The role played by ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has significantly contributed to industrial expansion and trade promotion in the region.

ASEAN cooperation in the area of investment has been no less significant and encouraging. The Association has already taken a bold and imaginative step towards investment known as ASEAN Investment Area (AIA). Under this scheme ASEAN hopes to attract increased FDI flows into and within the region on a sustainable and predictable basis. ASEAN economic cooperation in the 90s has made substantial progress and moved ahead at an accelerated pace encompassing wide ranging areas such as fool, agriculture and forestry, energy and minerals, transport and communications, tourism, intellectual property and



other services, science and technology, environment, culture and information, and social development.

Against this background, South Asia is a land of extreme contrasts. While the region is inhabited by one-fifth of world population, it occupies only 3.3 percent of the total landmass of the earth. It contains as small a country as Maldives and as big a country as India. If the region as a whole has disproportionate share in world resources, the countries of the region have among themselves all the more disproportionate shares in available regional resources. The asymmetrical situation of the region is so Indo-centric that India alone accounts for more than seventy percent of landmass, population and production.

Productivity and production of the region are so low that its total population as large as the fifth of humanity produces less than 2 percent of world GNP. Even less is its share in world trade, which has been declining over the past several years. If the role of the region in world economy is insignificant, its role within the region is marginal at present. SAARC trade is not only geared towards the countries outside the region, but is also moving away from the region in recent years.

For smaller countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives in South Asia, the basic problem is one of creating 'marketable surplus', that is, exportable surplus. Therefore for equitable distribution of benefits, it is desirable that trade expansion measures be linked with growth inducing measures. In other words, trade-induced growth strategy and growth-induced trade strategy should go together or *pari passu*. Country specialisation is one such growth inducing strategy. A country, however small and poorly endowed, may have comparative advantage in certain production lines, provided adequate market access is assured. Within the SAARC framework, if such lines of production could be identified and agreed upon for each member country, even the least developed country could spe-

cialise in the identified production sector for supply in the entire regional market. Such country specialisation e.g. diesel engine plant in Singapore, urea plant in Malaysia, soda ash plant in Thailand and super phosphate project in the Philippines adopted by ASEAN long ago is an object lesson for regional cooperation in South Asia.

ASEAN industrial Projects (AIP) were given access to the regional market under Preferential Trading Arrangement (PTA) introduced in 1977 and could, therefore, be large enough to enjoy the economies of scale. All ASEAN countries were required to participate in equity capital of the projects in certain proportion acceptable to the member states. AIP received a big boost when Takeo Fukuda, a former Japanese Prime Minister, pledged one billion US dollars. Likewise, industrial complementation along the ASEAN industrial Complementation model could be another element of growth inducing strategies. Under this regional arrangement, each member country may be allowed to produce certain mutually agreed complementary products and components for specific industry.

South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was conceived and implemented in 1995 as a means for the promotion of complementary and interdependence mentioned above. Product-by-product approach in the initial years under SAPTA, however, resulted in time-consuming tariff negotiation and has been replaced by "Across the Board Approach", but its effectiveness is diluted by a long list of excluded items considered sensitive. There is also criticism of tariff cuts, which are not deep enough to induce infra-regional trade expansion in a significant manner. Meanwhile, the importance of declaring South Asia a free trade area (SAFTA) was reiterated by the SAARC Heads of State or Government at the Tenth Summit in Colombo. A Committee of Experts has been assigned the task of drafting a comprehensive treaty regime for creating a free trade area.

The SAARC countries have given special emphasis to the important role

played by the Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the region. The SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) representing the private sector was set up in 1992 as the first recognized Apex Body. It is actively engaged in the promotion of trade and the interaction of the business community with the SAARC region. The Fifth South Asian Economic Cooperation Conference on "Government - Private Sector Partnership: A Strategic Alliance for 2010" was jointly organised by the SCCI and the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) only a few weeks ago in Kathmandu. SAARC Secretary - General Nihal Rodrigo in a statement to the Conference gave high marks to the SCCI for having identified products that need to be covered in tariff negotiations under SAPTA as well as for its advice on drafting the SAFTA Treaty framework. It is encouraging to note that SCCI has made known its commitment to SAFTA in a document entitled "Road Map to SAFTA". Close linkages should be established between ACCI and SCCI. Such linkages and periodic interaction will certainly contribute to the promotion of both inter and infra-regional trade and investment in the ASEAN and SAARC regions.

Liberal, open and market economic policy trend in South Asia is likely to be irreversible, irrespective of the political system that each country has adopted. The basic question, as Dr. B.P. Shrestha has pointed out, is whether the market oriented liberal economic policy package can address the problem of dualism or dualistic economic structures of the South Asian economy with vast hinterland of rural economy, which is yet outside the market mechanism and exchange economy, with very high incidence of poverty, hunger, unemployment and underemployment, disease and illiteracy. South Asia is probably more vulnerable to instability from within than from without. The development dimension of security has not received as much attention as it deserves, probably because it is less ex-



citing and less visible than the "military dimension". The nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998 evoked worldwide concern as against the grinding poverty and hunger, deepening disparity and inequality and growing unemployment and underemployment which have engendered a sense of frustration among the people of the region with the established order and authority. In brief, a host of anomalies and incongruities such as imbalance between population and environment, between aspiration and achievement, between small urban elites and vast rural masses and, above all, between growing affluence and abject poverty are probably more serious sources of instability and insecurity in the SAARC region than the commonly perceived threats.

#### **ASEAN Secretariat: Lesson for South Asia**

The ASEAN Secretariat came into being in 1976, that is, ten years after the formation of ASEAN. After more than 20 years since its creation it was felt that ASEAN's institutional setup for cooperation in general and the ASEAN Secretariat in particular need to be strengthened to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place both within the region and throughout the world. ASEAN Secretariat has been radically restructured and strengthened following a major review of its activities at the 1992 Singapore Summit. The three central roles assigned to the Secretariat are Coordination, Research and Information. The number of professional staff has also been increased from 14 to 25 for effective functioning of the Secretariat. ASEAN has recently upgraded the status of its Secretary - General and enhanced his role in coordinating and implementing ASEAN activities. The Secretary - General enjoys the status of a Minister and is appointed by the ASEAN Heads of Governments on the recommendation of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) for five years. With increased power and responsibilities befitting the post, he oversees the development and production of the three year ASEAN Co-

operation plan, presents the plan to the AMM and Heads of Government for approval and monitors its implementation. He leads sectoral dialogue relations with India and Pakistan, consultative relations with China and Russia. He also represents ASEAN as required in the development of relations with dialogue partners and other countries external to ASEAN. The Secretary - General has been empowered to make all the recruitment through a competitive process and in consultation with the members of the ASC.

The Report of the SAARC Mission on the visit to the ASEAN Secretariat (September 8-12, 1997) was available for study to the Group of Eminent Persons mandated by the Ninth summit in Male to undertake a comprehensive appraisal of SAARC and to develop an Agenda for 2000 and beyond. The Group in its Report has reached the conclusion that the role of the Secretary General and the SAARC Secretariat should be strengthened. While the Tenth Summit directed the Council of Ministers to make an in-depth examination of the Group Report, taking into consideration the views of Member States with regard to the viability of the recommendations and the method of their implementation, the Group's following recommendations on the role of the Secretary General and the SAARC Secretariat as lessons from the East Asian experience merit serious consideration.

The status and privileges enjoyed by the Secretary-General should be upgraded to that of a Minister.

SAARC has now evolved to a situation where the current system of appointing the Secretary General by national rotation and Directors through member state nomination should be dispensed with. SAARC should move towards recruiting the Secretary General and Directors on the basis of merit with due regard to the equitable representation of Member States.

The Secretary General shall be appointed by the SAARC Summit. His/her tenure should be for five years beginning from the next cycle.

Directors and new professional staff shall be appointed by the Secretary-General. In the case of Directors, their recruitment would be made from a short list prepared by a panel of experts from within the region appointed by the Secretary General. The final authority in selection will be with the Secretary General.

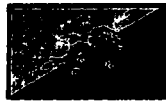
In order to address the urgent short-term needs of the Secretariat, 2 or 3 professionals may be immediately inducted to the Secretariat in order to assist the Secretary General to cope with the current workload. More professionals may be recruited as and when the additional workload from deeper integration warrants their recruitment.

To overcome the problems posed by limited expertise and research capabilities of the Secretariat, the Secretary General and the Secretariat may take appropriate steps to benefit from research carried out on specific subjects by specialists and other centres of excellence within the region. To this end, the SAARC Secretariat should establish a standing network of institutions whose services can readily be drawn upon.

The obvious budgetary implications arising from the above recommendations must be taken into account and Member States should augment their budgetary contributions accordingly. A portion of the voluntary contributions that Member States would place at the disposal of the Secretary General for the integrated Programme of Action (IPA) may be earmarked for undertaking studies and preparation of data bases.

#### **Japan's role in promoting South Asian Integration**

Although Japan is one of the investor countries for South Asia, its presence in this region is not as significant and visible as it is in East and Southeast Asia. There has no doubt been a steady increase in Japan's FDI inflows to the region in the 1990s. Japanese ODA to SAARC member states is mostly



available through loans, which focus upon the development of infrastructure.

A formidable problem confronting South Asia, as stated earlier, is poverty. A staggering number of nearly 440 million people as mentioned in the Report of the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (November, 1992) live in absolute poverty in this region. Each country has accorded topmost priority to poverty alleviation in its strategic plans for national development. Japan in setting forth its criteria for ODA would do well to take this reality into account.

With the global economy fast liberalising itself South Asian countries have adopted liberal economic policies. Each SAARC country is interested in promoting export industries, increasing economic growth and enhancing the well-being of the people by attracting FDI and encouraging the private sector. SAPATA has already become operational in the SAARC region. Measures such as SAPTA and

SAFTA will certainly help SAARC emerge as an integrated region with a positive impact on Japan to increase its ODA and FDI flows to the region. Japanese companies have played a catalytic role in facilitating infra regional horizontal division of labour under Industrial Complementation, BBC and AFTA schemes in Southeast Asia. As SAARC is anxious to expand its infra regional activities through SAPTA, Japanese multinationals can contribute to this process by establishing a horizontal division of labour as they have done in ASEAN. These companies through their production bases in both East Asia and South Asia can facilitate trade and investment linkages between the two Asian regions.

Japan and East Asia as Dynamic Asian Economies (DAE) can help generate regional economic dynamism in South Asia through their capital and technology. The SAARC Japan Special Fund is a symbol of Japan's positive interest in South Asian regional cooperation. The Fund's resources should be prudently utilised to help SAARC countries implement a collective project designed

to develop human resources (HRD), a critical component of economic development in the region. In brief, Japan should come forward positively to support and assist SAARC in its pursuit of economic cooperation and integration for achieving peace, prosperity and stability in the region.

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