

Multilateral Security Cooperation in South Asia

Dr. Dhurba Rizal

A region is a geographical cluster of states that are proximate to each other and thus are interconnected in spatial and cultural terms. This interconnectedness may manifest itself in strong security and in some instances economic ties. A regional sub-system has also been said to generate a set of “security complexes”. The South Asian region has some sub-systemic characteristics as well as different clusters of relationships that cannot be placed neatly under a systemic framework. The region is geographically and demographically India-centric, given that nearly seventy percent of the land mass and population lie with India.

The South Asian countries are developing a flexible multilateral partnership and trying to secure their freedom of maneuver through mutual accommodation and multiple regime membership as comprehensive security devoid of collective economic cooperation is simply unsustainable. On multilateralism frontage, regional leaders agreed to establish dialogue partnership with other regional bodies and with states outside the region interested in SAARC activities. Inclusion of Afghanistan as the eighth member in SAARC has not only ensured the integrity of South Asian strategic geography but also established a connection with the Middle East and Central Asia. China, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar, European Union, USA, Iran and Mauritius were given observer status. Addition of China and Japan as observers of SAARC is enlarging its vision and opening itself to the outside world. The EU is following a pro-active policy of engagement with the region and consistently affirmed its interest in strengthening links with SAARC. China, Japan and South Korea by the logics of geo-economics of proximity are attracted towards the economic potential of this region. Economic cooperation strongly anchored within the South Asian Free Trade Area and World Trade Organization is expected to produce spillovers into other sectors and generate contextual confidence in harnessing mutual investment, economic union and ultimately the formation of a South Asian economic community. Expansion of member and engagements of regional and global powerhouses in the region mean raising the profile of South Asian regionalism, expanding the scope for multilateralism, enlarging the areas of functional cooperation and building a foundation for security. This expansion of SAARC from an intra regional organization to inter regional organization and developing external linkages are indicative of the high level of maturity that SAARC has achieved as an organization as well as provided an avenue for multilateral cooperation.

Despite impressive progress in economic fascia, the multilateral approaches to traditional security are being undertaken in an ad hoc and functionally-specific manner. The overwhelming pattern of defense relationships within South Asia has been bilateral. Only few have a "multilateralist" impact, offering a measure of reassurance against strategic uncertainty and serving as confidence building measures. SAARC has acted as a forum for confidence-building measure over and above the limited bilateral measures agreed between member nations and summits have helped to diffuse bilateral tensions on a number of occasions.¹ Powerful countries like China, US and Japan are given observer status in SAARC with a view that the presence of

¹ India did not volunteer a policy of diffuse reciprocity in dealing with its smaller neighbours, although the Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s did indicate a brief but significant departure from this practice, briefly rekindling hope for a more robust South Asian regionalism. The Gujral Doctrine, however, was not applied to Pakistan.

observers will modify India's voice in the regional organization and prevent the exercise of monopoly over South Asian system. However, expansion of SAARC with the entry of Afghanistan in April 2007 has added mortification to Pakistan. Observer status to China has added indignity to India. With Iran as an observer, it added discomfiture to the US. These developments question the relevance of the regional organization and cooperative security in South Asia.

However, the increasing economic interdependence, people-to-people contacts and trans-boundary security concerns have given important impetus for countries in the region to cooperate and integrate for advancing a regional security community. Therefore, it would be important to develop a concrete strategy for systematic, multilateral and regular security cooperation efforts based on on-going bilateral cooperation efforts. Plans to promote confidence-building would also be important as a prerequisite to security cooperation. Currently, there are debates on holding regular seminars on security cooperation, constructing hotlines, exchanging liaison officials, carrying out training observation programs and sharing information among South Asian countries. On state security, the SAARC has to undertake confidence building measures such as regular dialogue and consultations at the ministerial and senior officials levels, publication of defense white papers, promotion of a regional arms registry, promotion of joint military exercises, disaster relief and search and rescue cooperation between civilian and military personnel, training for peacekeeping operations in support of the United Nations and cooperation among defense colleges on state security issues. While SAARCs' founders have failed to recognize the practicality of institution-building, they have to professed aspirations and adopt fundamental norms, including non-interference, regional self-reliance and non-alignment. South Asian actors should show a preference for dialogue-oriented approaches to cooperation as well developing conventional legalistic institutions.

All these efforts to promote multilateral security cooperation in the region would be more effective, when simultaneously pursued with comprehensive security cooperation efforts, which would also include non-traditional security issues. Scholars and policy-makers, who are carrying out this debate, regard non-traditional security cooperation among countries in the region as a stepping stone towards a broader regional security community. Therefore, consolidating confidence building measures in a "more traditional" political and military sense seem to be more crucial at least in advancing South Asian security cooperation. Once a multilateral security cooperation regime is established, regardless of whether or not it succeeds in addressing and resolving particular security issues, the regime itself will have the authority to promote inter-state cooperation efforts. In conclusion, despite obstacles, efforts should continue to develop a regional community for security cooperation. It is likely that these efforts will develop into a "bi-multilateral cooperation framework," which will be a multilateral mechanism to complement existing bilateral relations and alliances. In order to increase the synergy effects of this mechanism, governments in the region need to make a systematic and concerted effort to devise a security policy that would reflect increasing public awareness of changing international and regional security environments, while at the same time accommodating various views on security issues.