

Role of SAARC in South Asia

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What role does SAARC have to play in lessening tensions in South Asia?

Established in 1985, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is still struggling to establish its identity in the region. SAARC represents eight South Asian countries, which includes India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan. Interestingly, South Asia in last one decade remained in international news for many reasons but no one has bothered about the positions of SAARC. The obvious related question is does SAARC have a position on burning issues of South Asia? Not going into much of scrutiny, the latest skirmishes between India and Pakistan can explain the weak and almost negligible existence of SAARC in general perception. The killing of Indian soldiers at LoC has sparked war of words between the two countries and media; particularly the electronic media started running daylong commentaries on the incident. The statement of White House was widely covered; the Pakistan's demand for probe by United Nations is also debated, but everyone forgets that even in the region we have our own organisation. Is SAARC been purposely omitted? The answer is 'No', unfortunately SAARC do not have a position, appeal or statement on the present crisis. Even the secretary general of SAARC has not uttered a word on this matter. It is very difficult to understand that a problem, which actually affected the peace process between two important constituents of SAARC failed to attract the attention of SAARC secretariat.

For a hypothetical defense we can assume that Indo-Pak relations is a bilateral matter and SAARC secretariat should avoid making direct references to arguments related to the killing of soldiers. It can also be argued that as per the article X (ii) of SAAARC charter, bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations. While acknowledging the limitations of SAARC, it is also a fact that Indo-Pak relations are one of the biggest roadblocks in regional integration process of South Asia. The killings of soldiers at LoC have potential to derail the ongoing peace process between New Delhi and Islamabad and

therefore complete silence of SAARC is frustrating. What restrict SAARC secretariat to issue a simple appeal for both the governments to observe restraint.

Role of regional organisation is central in regional integration process and this has proved correct in case of the European Union (EU). India and Pakistan are already trying to bridge the existing gap between them by promoting trade across the borders, relaxing visa regimes and having frequent high-level discussions on number of topics. These positive steps for peace by both the countries cannot be a basis for SAARC to abdicate its responsibility. As the organisation of the South Asian countries, the first and foremost duty of SAARC is to promote regional integration and if Indo-Pak relations are getting sour it is a cause of major worry. Unfortunately, SAARC even in past avoided a pro-active role and this is a serious drawback for the regional integration process. Intervention in domestic affairs is different from constructive involvement at the regional level and it is expected that SAARC will play the latter role.

In future there are many precarious matters where SAARC as a regional organisation of South Asian countries should formulate its positions. Foreign troops will be withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2014 and organisations like North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and EU have positions but as an organisation of South Asian countries, SAARC has yet to develop its own understanding about the post-2014 situation. So much is been discussed about the possibility of regional security arrangements in the post 2014 Afghanistan but what about the position of SAARC. These are some of the important queries and as an organisation, committed for promoting regional integration, SAARC should respond to these questions. Regional integration is desired in South Asia; therefore the role of SAARC is indispensable.