

Mutual Trust and Understanding Among South Asian Nations a Must



Negotiation is one of the most crucial conflict resolution strategies. The essence of any negotiation lies in reaching a middle point by the parties involved in the process. But suppose the parties are reluctant to negotiate a disputed matter for fear of the fact that it will disrupt the negotiation. In that case, there is no point in entering into a negotiation in the first place. This is what is happening with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or with the issue of regional cooperation in South Asia. The organization was founded upon the mandate that any contentious bilateral issue would not be negotiated or deliberated. This principle exposes not only the fallacy of negotiation within SAARC, but also the very essence of founding an Inter-governmental organization.

This type of organization is founded to facilitate multilateral negotiation so that the states do not have to conduct or arrange negotiations independently. This facility is theoretically conceptualized as mitigating multilateral negotiation's 'transaction cost'. SAARC clearly does not fulfill this criterion. Bilateral contention between the two nuclear powers of this region is thought to be the major reason behind the stagnancy of regional cooperation in South Asia. However, another venture of regional cooperation through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is also not meeting

expectations. BIMSTEC is often dubbed as a 'non-starter' because of the low turnout in terms of forging a regional partnership.

The absence of any effective regional cooperation framework has far-reaching effects. It is not only creating a fertile ground of political mistrust but also hindering cooperation regarding issues having shared interests. Every aspect of bilateral or multilateral engagement has a political connotation. It will be a euphoric idea to cooperate on apolitical issues since the very notion of apolitical is utopian. South Asian nations have many similarities in terms of socio-cultural attributes. However, the region has also showcased a poor record of cultural diplomacy, and shared cultural bonds have failed to produce any positive political development.

This is true for many other sectors. Most of the nations of this region are disaster-prone, as the Bay of Bengal is one of the major hotspots for cyclones and tropical storms. They are disproportionately more vulnerable than other nations across the globe. However, we have not yet seen any credible partnership among the nations in this regard. Even a global pandemic could not break the shackle of non-cooperation in this region, There was only a rhetorical framework of vaccine sharing, but vaccines ultimately became a politicized issue. Vaccine sharing also failed on a bilateral basis despite having friendly relations. This resembles the deep-rooted nature of mistrust among.

South Asian nations have a lot to work together for their mutual benefit. Regional cooperation regarding pollution, IUU Fishing, narcotics trafficking, and human trafficking are very much needed for the mutual benefit of each state. No state can control marine pollution as it is a transboundary issue. The littoral states also have to adopt a synergized policy to tackle the issue of IUU fishing, as it is nearly impossible for a single state to control IUU fishing in its maritime boundary. Narcotics and human trafficking pose threats to national and human security. The regional partnership can lessen human suffering in this regard.

South Asia needs a coalition of the willing, not the rhetoric of regional cooperation anymore. As mentioned earlier, there are multifaceted threats to human security for the people of the region. These issues are not apolitical, but they need to be resolved for the welfare of the people. These issues are not directly related to longstanding disputes; therefore, these issues can be negotiated. It is not to be expected that they will be resolved immediately and pave the way for regional cooperation. The coalition of the willing has to have the willingness to work in the long run and break the shackles of non-cooperation.

The political leaders have to grasp the danger of mistrust among the states in this region. If there is a major oil spillage incident in the Bay and Indian Ocean Region, then the outreach of this catastrophe will be massive. Artificial disasters can both be prevented and managed, but

natural disasters cannot be prevented. However, mutual cooperation can ensure better preparedness, recovery, and mitigation in both cases. Therefore, a shared sense of working together on the issues like climate change, natural disasters, and marine pollution has the potential to pave the way for building mutual confidence. The maritime domain can be a suitable sphere of joint action, and a series of confidence-building measures can be instrumental in this regard. However, the road to any breakthrough is still tricky because of the years of practice of putting national interest over anything else. Nevertheless, the taboo is more than this, and it needs to break for the sake of humanity.

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The article was published in [the daily observer](#) newspaper on November 28, 2022