SAARC AND ITS ANALYSIS

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. SAARC comprises of eight Member States: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on 17 January 1987.

There are currently nine Observers to SAARC, namely: (i) Australia; (ii) China; (iii) the European Union; (iv) Iran; (v) Japan; (vi) the Republic of Korea; (vii) Mauritius; (viii) Myanmar; and (ix) the United States of America.

Objectives of SAARC:

- to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life;
- to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials;
- to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia;
- to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems;
- to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and
- to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

Decisions at all levels are to be taken on the basis of unanimity; and bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from the deliberations of the Association.

AREAS OF COOPERATION

- Human Resource Development and Tourism
- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Environment, Natural Disasters and Biotechnology
- Economic, Trade and Finance
- Social Affairs
- Information and Poverty Alleviation
- Energy, Transport, Science and Technology
- Education, Security and Culture

SAARC Specialized Bodies

SAARC Development Fund (SDF)

- Its primary objective is funding of project-based collaboration in social sectors such as poverty alleviation, development, etc.
- SDF is governed by a Board consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Finance of the Member States. The Governing Council of SDF (Finance Ministers of MSs) oversees the functioning of the Board.

South Asian University

- South Asian University (SAU) is an international university, located in India. Degrees and Certificates awarded by the SAU are at par with the respective Degrees and Certificates awarded by the National Universities/Institutions.

South Asian Regional Standards Organization
South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) has its Secretariat at Dhaka, Bangladesh. It was established to achieve and enhance coordination and cooperation among SAARC member states in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed to develop harmonized Standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.

**SAARC Arbitration Council**

- It is an inter-governmental body having its office in Pakistan is mandated to provide a legal framework/forum within the region for fair and efficient settlement of commercial, industrial, trade, banking, investment and such other disputes, as may be referred to it by the member states and their people.

**SAARC Achievements**

- **Free Trade Area (FTA):** SAARC is comparatively a new organization in the global arena. The member countries have established a Free Trade Area (FTA) which will increase their internal trade and lessen the trade gap of some states considerably.
- **SAPTA: South Asia Preferential Trading Agreement** for promoting trade amongst the member countries came into effect in 1995.
- **SAFTA:** A Free Trade Agreement confined to goods, but excluding all services like information technology. Agreement was signed to reduce customs duties of all traded goods to zero by the year 2016.
- **SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS):** SATIS is following the GATS-plus ‘positive list’ approach for trade in services liberalization.
- **SAARC University:** Establish a SAARC university in India, a food bank and also an energy reserve in Pakistan.

**Importance of SAARC for India:**

- Neighbourhood first: Primacy to the country’s immediate neighbours.
- Geostategic significance: Can counter China (OBOR initiative) through engaging Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka in development process and economic cooperation.
- Regional stability: SAARC can help in creation of mutual trust and peace within the region.
- Global leadership role: It offers India a platform to showcase its leadership in the region by taking up extra responsibilities.
- Game changer for India’s Act East Policy: by linking South Asian economies with South East asian will bring further economic integration and prosperity to India mainly in the Services Sector.

**South Asian Satellite:**

The GSAT-9(SAARC Satellite) has been launched with an objective to provide different communication applications in Ku-band with coverage over South Asian countries. It is launched by GSLV F09- 49 metres tall and weighing around 450 ton, the GSLV is a three stage rocket. The first stage is fired with solid fuel, the second with liquid fuel and the third is the cryogenic engine. The first stage is fired with solid fuel, the second with liquid fuel and the third is the cryogenic engine.

- Launched by ISRO
- It will be used by countries of SAARC except Pakistan
- Plan for this satellite was announced in 2014 SAARC summit
- It is launched by GSLV-F09
- The satellite will provide a full range of applications and services in the fields of telecommunication and broadcasting applications, namely, Television, Direct-to-Home (DTH), Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSATs), Tele-education, Telemedicine and Disaster Management Support.

**This is what it means for India and South Asia:**
Data from GSAT-9 will be shared with Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It was also offered to Pakistan, which turned it down. India is also working with Afghanistan but a deal has still not be ironed out.

At least one transponder of this satellite will be available to the participating countries, which will help them connect with each other. In other words, the satellite will help India gain a footprint that extends all over South Asia. Not just that, this ‘gift’ is a first such move from any country in this region.

The participating nations anticipate a Rs 10,000 crore ($1.5 billion) benefit from the satellite’s 12-year lifespan.

Each country has to develop its own ground infrastructure though India is willing to extend assistance and know-how.

The satellite also has the capability to provide secure hot lines among the participating nations in addition since the region is highly prone to earthquakes, cyclones, floods, tsunamis, it may help in providing critical communication links in times of disasters.

The 2230-kg satellite has been fabricated in three years and is purely a communications satellite costing Rs 450 crore. The satellite's main structure is cuboid in shape, built around a central cylinder with a mission life of more than 12 years.

The nearly 50-m-tall rocket that weighs about 412 tonnes will carry what is now dubbed as the 'South Asia Satellite' or what the Isro still prefers to call GSAT-9.

The mission is part of PM Modi's proposal on June 30, 2014 to Isro, asking them to develop a satellite that can be dedicated to our neighbourhood as a ‘gift’ from India.

Modi's efforts got a jolt when even after participating in the planning meeting on June 22, 2015, Pakistan decided to 'opt out' from the proposed SAARC satellite, suggesting it had its own space program'.

The project was renamed to 'South Asia Satellite' but sources say Pakistan was not allowed to veto the development project. Frequency co-ordination activities took longer than expected and the launch got postponed by almost six months.

Among India's neighbours, three nations already possess full-fledged communication satellites with Pakistan and Sri Lanka having been helped by China; Afghanistan also has a communication satellite, which is an an old India-made satellite acquired from Europe. Bangladesh is likely to have its first bird in the sky later this year made with help from Thales.

Experts say “Pakistan has missed an opportunity” since its own space programme is currently in a primitive stage as compared to India's, this, despite the fact that Islamabad actually launched its first rocket five years ahead of India and its space agency Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO) is older than ISRO.

Pakistan has had five satellites in space but today lacks heavy duty launchers and satellite fabrication facilities.

The South Asia Satellite is India's plan to counter China's growing influence on its neighbours. But in the 21st-century Asian space race, China already has the first mover advantage.

**SAARC’s Resurrection**

On March 15, India led from the front in hosting the first SAARC meeting in years, following PM Modi’s proposal to hold a virtual meet through video to devise a regional strategy in fighting the rapidly spreading coronavirus. He proposed that the “leadership of SAARC nations chalk out a strong strategy to fight coronavirus”.

The virtual meeting included leaders of seven countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the special health adviser to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan. They discussed the rising cases of coronavirus in the subcontinent, measures taken to halt the spread of the raging virus, and possible treatment methods.

India laid out its ongoing efforts and action plan to limit the outbreak of the coronavirus.
The meet was important from quite a few perspectives. First, it is a crisis turned opportunity by bringing together countries of the region for the first high-level SAARC meet since 2014 by providing directional leadership with health diplomacy as its core objective—an agenda which none can refuse. Moreover, this was the organisation’s first meeting in four years after India had declined to meet in Islamabad in 2016 citing cross-border terrorism (Uri Attack) as the basis.

Then, other countries of SAARC like Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan had also pulled out leaving SAARC directionless. Second, India’s decision to hold the conference despite its open reservations against talking to Pakistan reflects a befitting attitude of a leader-nation that has risen above bilateral animosity to engage all nations to think of the larger regional good. It shows its mature understanding that global challenges require coordinated response.

This was evident when India chose to ignore Pakistan’s use of the SAARC forum to rake up the Kashmir issue, even though the meet had a different and a much more pressing agenda. Major countries of the world including the US and Russia have lauded India’s efforts towards preparing South Asia for a collective response.

Although, India’s decision came a day after the World Health Organisation (WHO) floated the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund with the help of corporate bodies, foundations and the UN Foundation and a day prior to a similar videoconference between G7 leaders, bringing the SAARC leaders on a common platform by India has been held as a masterstroke.

Among tangible deliverables, the meeting saw India’s proposal of a COVID-19 emergency fund for SAARC countries to fight the pandemic, extending $10 million as India’s contribution for the fund.

Contributions to the emergency fund have also been committed by Sri Lanka ($5 million), Bangladesh ($1.5 million), Nepal ($1 million), Afghanistan ($1 million), Maldives ($200,000) and Bhutan ($100,000) taking the total amount in the COVID-19 Emergency Fund to $18.3 million. Pakistan’s contribution is still awaited.

Since the leaders’ videoconference, the senior health professionals of SAARC countries also met on another video conference on March 26 to exchange experiences of combating the spread of COVID-19 thus far and share best practices.

SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC-IU), Gandhinagar has set up a website (http://www.covid19-sdmc.org/) on COVID-19 for shared use of SAARC countries.

A ‘special cell’ in the Ministry of External Affairs of India is coordinating and monitoring coordination of regional efforts with SAARC countries.