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SAARC Projects New Hope For Regional Progress

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THE fifth summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is being held in the Maldives capital Male at a time when new forces of globalism have been unleashed and international interdependence has assumed economic and social dimensions which were not foreseen even a decade ago.

The formal end of the cold war with signing of the treaty between the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries on conventional disarmament on Monday and the August 2 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait are two contrary events. But they have highlighted the globalism and interdependence among countries not for political reasons but for dealing with economic and social factors.

In the six years of the SAARC, there has been a lot of scepticism about the growth of regionalism in South Asia. As the Heads of State and government of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and host Maldives sit for the three-day summit, it can be said with confidence that despite its many limitations SAARC has been able to draw a degree of commitment from its member-states.

There may be many criticism about the regional forum not being able to move forward at a pace expected of it, yet today in the subcontinent nobody can think about South Asia without SAARC.

This psychological impact is a major success of regionalism in South Asia with his historical legacy of distrust and divisiveness, its cross border

ethnic overflows and its religious and racial strifes.

Amidst all internal turmoils and external sensitivities in the region, the countries recognise that SAARC is the only positive harmonising element. That leaders and the people in the region recognise its importance is reflected in the fact that despite all problems the summit is taking place, that the top leaders of the region are meeting for the time in six years not to talk about their differences but to discuss the common issues which confront them.

Although sceptics may talk volumes about the negative forces within the region, the strength of regional cooperation lies in the fact that it recognises its limitations. There are three basic characteristics in SAARC. First, it has a social and economic mandate, not a political one. Second, it has decided to deal with commonalities while recognising the divisiveness in the region. Therefore, it has agreed to keep contentious bilateral issues out of the area and scope of its functioning. Third, South Asian cooperation will not duplicate but rather supplement the efforts of multilateral cooperation in the region. SAARC also does not take resources from outside unless it has exhausted all its resources within the region. In reality, it has taken on funding or technical help from outside so far.

The fifth SAARC summit which was scheduled to take place in Colombo had been delayed by almost a year because of ethnic turmoils, poli-

tical instabilities and bilateral tensions. During this interminable period there have been a lot of behind-the-scene diplomatic moves to make the wheels of regional cooperation move. In these efforts, Bangladesh took a decisive role. President Ershad through his personalised diplomacy impressed upon the leaders of the six other countries the need for getting together in the interest of regional peace and harmony and for gearing up development. He met with regional leaders and kept regular correspondence with them urging them that regional cooperation can only move forward, and it is in this positive development the future of the subcontinent and its one billion people lies.

Since 1982 the materialisation of the concept of SAARC which was initiated by Bangladesh has been a major foreign policy thrust of Dhaka. Because of careful stewardship by President Ershad of the initial processes, the first summit of the South Asian leaders was held in Dhaka in 1985.

The Dhaka Declaration marked the launching of a new era in South Asian relations in which the leaders vowed to construct new partnerships and hold out the hand of friendship and cooperation. As the first Chairman of SAARC, President Ershad saw to it that the teething period of the regional forum was as less painful as possible. The following year the second summit was held in Bangalore in India with the third in Kathmandu and the fourth in Islamabad.

At every summit the urge to cooperate has grown and the areas of cooperation were widened. Twelve areas of cooperation have been identified under the Integrated Programme of Action adopted by the seven countries. These have been basically confined to sharing of experience, through workshops and seminars. Cooperation, therefore, has been of a short-term mature and of limited dimensions.

But the importance of SAARC lies in the fact that it is a structured cooperation with its infrastructural facilities including a permanent Secretariat. It has also a definite mandate and therefore it has a potential for growth.

Already SAARC has set out a clear cut positive role in developing anti-poverty programmes in the region which include prevention and management of disasters, protection of the environment and human resources development.

Regional cooperation is also addressing to core issues involved with economic development like cooperation in trade, manufactures development and services sectors.

The scope for regional cooperation is increasing and this is evident in the treaty on suppression of terrorism. The current summit is expected to sign another treaty on the prevention and eradication of drug abuse in the region.

(To be continued)