

FUNCTIONAL COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA-SAARC AND OTHER REGIONAL POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Functionalism and Neo-functionalism are important theories of international politics. Both these theories have helped us to analyse growing interconnectedness and interdependence that has come to characterize foreign relations between various nations, especially their relations with group of countries located in a specific region. While European Union represents the most important example of successful integration of nations in functional terms, there has not been much development in this respect as far as countries of south Asia are concerned. My research proposal seek to identify main cause this this tendency as well as examine the possibility of future cooperation between various nations located in south Asia that may ultimately result into development of larger functional organizations.

KEYWORDS: *Functionalism, SAARC, Neo-factionalism, Bick Corridor, European Union.*

Functionalism as a theory supports the idea of growing interconnectedness and interdependence between nation states located in a specific region. The core assumption of functionalist theory in this sense is that, as nation's states gets interdependent and interrelated to each other the possibility of bilateral or even regional conflict between nation states gets reduced or even eliminated to a large extent. The chief proponent of this school of thought is political scientist David Mittany who argued in favour of development of "piecemeal non-political technical organization"(Heywood,2013) composed of various member states located in a particular region. Mitanni believed that establishment of cooperation in technical areas had multiple advantages namely-it allowed nation states to actively engage with each other without raising controversial political issues, associated with state sovereignty, that may eventually hamper any prospect of regional cooperation and secondly, it promoted cooperation key economic areas that holds mutual benefits for all the nations located in specific region. An important aspect of Mittany theory was the notion of "spill over effect"(Ignou,2013) that allowed cooperation between nations in one area to simply spillover to other areas thereby laying grounds for possible future integration. The most important example in this context is that of European Union which initially started as 6 member bloc in the form European coal and steel community but as a result of mutual complementarities created by this and various other European initiatives it ultimately transformed itself into European union as constituted by Maastricht treaty.

Another strand of functionalist thought is neo functionalism (Heywood,2013).This theory is associated with ideas of Earnst Haas who advocated cooperation between nation states not just in technical but also in core political areas . Thus, Hass believed that political leaders in various nation states should be convinced to transfer a measure of their political sovereignty to larger supranational organization that would foster much closer cooperation between nation states located in a particular region. European Union has shown this kind of tendency as it has successfully established the office of high representative on foreign affairs. Joseph Nye has particularly appreciated this development in international politics as he noted that" neo-functional integration has been successful in establishing island of peace in international politics". However, given the political differences that exists between nations states in south Asia, any expectation of neo-functional integration would a little too optimistic.

CAN SOUTH ASIA FOLLOW EUROPEAN EXAMPLE IE GROWING FUNCTIONAL INTEGRETION BETWEEN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES?

South Asia mainly comprises of 8 countries namely-India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldieves, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. These countries share great amount of cultural similarity in terms of their language, history, tradition as well as presence of common ethnic groups in different countries. However, despite this

similarities, relationship between these countries are characterized by conflict and mutual hostility towards each. There are many key problems that have actually prevented countries in this region from cooperation with each other which could be summed up in four key factors. First factor is associated with border dispute between these countries that has greatly hampered political relations between these countries. Moreover, this border dispute is not just limited to India and Pakistan, over the issue of Kashmir and other disputed territories, but other countries in this region are involved in border disputes with each other such as Afghanistan-Pakistan dispute over validity of Durand line. Secondly, most of the south Asian countries have common concern regarding overwhelming political dominance of India in this region (Ghai, 2010). In this context a large number of countries often play china card in order to keep India's influence under check. Most recent example being Nepal signing separate transit agreement with China after blockade of key transit points with India due to political protest of Madhesi population against key provisions of their new constitution. Third problem is associated with SAARC charter itself that promote decision making on basis of unanimity of all member countries of this organization (Article X(2), SAARC charter). This effectively gives Pakistan an opportunity to block any progressive measure taken by this organization, such as proposed signing of rail agreement and transport agreement at 2014 SAARC summit in Nepal (Times of India, November 26, 2014). Fourth factor is associated with lack of geographical contiguity between SAARC nations, with India being the only nation that connects all Saarc nations, this hampers development of sub regional cooperation between SAARC member nations. Another important factor behind low level of cooperation between SAARC nations is the low level of trade relations between SAARC members. Safta in this respect has failed to deepen economic ties between various member countries with most of the member states still maintaining large number of items in their negative list (Sahney and Kumar, 2008) that effectively reduces the scope for intra-regional trade. Further, despite provisions of SAFTA coming into effect most of the SAARC member countries have only allowed limited entry points for other states that which severely restricts trade relations between these countries (Ibid).

However, existence of above listed factor doesn't mean that there is no scope for possible future cooperation between South Asian countries on functional basis. South Asian countries faces number of complementary and

possible future cooperation between these countries can greatly help them to overcome various challenges. One such challenge is the issue of power shortage in Pakistan (Telegraph, 6 January, 2014), however, through functional cooperation within SAARC, member states could provide Pakistan with an important opportunity on leverage on India and Nepal hydropower potential to overcome its power shortage problems. Similarly, countries like Nepal and Bhutan could greatly benefit if they foster much closer relationship with India especially in technical areas such as trade, transit, power generation etc. These countries have great opportunity to take advantage of power Hungary country in their neighbourhood with whom they share large extensive land boundary.

Apart from SAARC, which has proven itself to be ineffective so far due to mutual disagreements between member countries over various issues, especially due to Pakistan's lack of action in curtailing cross border terrorism, there are other possibilities for fostering cooperation between other member states on sub regional basis such as recently concluded BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India) motor vehicle agreement that would allow free movement of goods between member countries. Thus, some new arrangement of forging closer functional cooperation between eastern south Asian countries could be developed that would be to great advantage to all the countries located this region. Another possibility in this respect is BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal initiative for multi sectorial technical and economic cooperation) based regional cooperation that would not only integrate various eastern south Asian countries (Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and India) but would also include Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand (The Hindu, 18 October, 2016). China proposal for BCIM (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and China) corridor is another interesting possibility although this would imply growing involvement of China in south Asian politics that may not be to the liking of India.

EXTENT TO WHICH THESE POSSIBLE REGIONAL GROUPINGS COULD FACILITATE FUNCTIONAL COOPERATION

Lack of action on part of Pakistan to curtail its terrorist activities and its constant opposition to various mutually beneficial agreement that would have helped all the SAARC member states has compelled various SAARC member countries to conceive an alternative mechanism for regional cooperation in South Asia. One such possibility is cooperation between eastern south

Asian countries. By eastern south Asian countries, I am referring to countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal that are not only geographically contiguous to each other but also do not have any outstanding bilateral dispute that may hamper their relations with each other. Further, close relations between these nations could provide mutual benefit to all countries located in this region, for instance, Nepal and Bhutan may get access to port facilities of Bangladesh, while Bangladesh itself may benefit from surplus water and power resources that Bhutan and Nepal has to offer. India which is the main connecting link between these countries has also sought to maintain amicable relations with these countries. India and Bangladesh have resolved a large number of their outstanding bilateral disputes, such as dispute over land boundary agreement and have also accepted permanent court of arbitration judgement over settlement of their maritime boundaries (The hindu,9 July,2014).Further, it is hoped that in future two countries would also be able to resolve their dispute over sharing of Teesta and Feni river water. As far as India-Nepal relations are concerned then there have certainly been some irritants that have hampered close cooperation between these two countries in recent years, such as Nepal accusing India of instigating protest by Madhesi group resulting into blockade of transit routes with India(Indian express,13 October,2015).However, despite these problems both countries have demonstrated their willingness to work over their outstanding differences as evident from India's support for new amendments passed into Nepal's constitution that would safeguard interest of Madhesi population. Thus for India fostering closer ties with east south Asian countries would make much sense as it would not only allow India to gain greater access to north-eastern part of country via Bangladesh, but it would also help to open up new economic opportunities in North east India that would ensure economic development of this largely neglected part of India.

BIMSTEC is another organization that has become much more relevant in facilitating Functional integration in south Asia. Advantage with BIMSTEC is that India has already taken number of initiatives to develop much closer connectivity links with south east Asia, particularly with Myanmar and Thailand, Both of which are also BIMSTEC members (The hindu,27 september,2016).Important project in this respect include Moreh-Tamu road that would connect important points in India with Myanmar and Kaladan muti modal transport project that would play an important role in movement of goods from India to other

South east Asian countries. Thus, India in this respect would use BIMSTEC initiative in order to foster much closer cooperation between eastern south Asian countries and south east Asian countries. A BIMSTEC based free trade agreement would also reduce pressure on India to participate in regional comprehensive partnership agreement, which in turn contains large number of provisions that may actually hamper India's economic interest, such as insistence on incorporating provisions of wipac sponsored patent law treaty(The Hindu, April 23,2016).

Another possibility of fostering functional cooperation in south Asia could be on basis of several initiatives promoted by China. Many smaller nation states in this region would actually be much more receptive to China based initiative, linked to their one belt one road programme, as it would not only allow them to take advantage of trading opportunities with China but would also encourage them to come out of shadows of India with China acting as countervailing force that would prevent any possible future domination of such organization by India. BCIM (Bangladesh, India, China and Myanmar) is an important initiative in this context as it would foster much closer connectivity between these countries that would greatly improve economic prospects, especially for smaller nations located in this area. However, growing involvement of China in south Asian politics may not be acceptable to India, as it mainly sees South Asia as its own exclusive sphere of influence.

CONCLUSION

Thus despite apparent failure of SAARC there is still some hope for fostering functional cooperation amongst south Asian countries. However, in order to capitalize on these opportunities all the countries must rise above their narrow outlook of world politics and recognize the importance of mutual cooperation especially in non-political technical areas that may ultimately help these countries in achieving their political and economic objectives. In a world witnessing growth of regional trading blocs, an economically vibrant south Asia with large scale functional cooperation is important for protecting interest of various nation states located in this region.

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