
Zahid Shahab Ahmed. 2013. *Regionalism and Regional Security in South Asia- The role of SAARC*, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited 217 pp. ISBN 9781409467694 (Hardcover)

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Today when the world is grappling with new issues and challenges and the “Global South” is taking a lead in engaging with critical issues of security, in an exhaustive study Zahid Shahab Ahmed analyses regionalism and regional security in South Asia with a particular focus on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). An expansion of his doctoral thesis at the University of New England, Australia, the volume on SAARC is a result of historical and contemporary analysis of the SAARC as well as empirical analysis gained from the author’s personal interactions with officials at the SAARC secretariat in Nepal and several interviews with influential people in the SAARC hierarchy.

The central assumption of this research is that regional cooperation through both agreements and actions in areas of human security strengthens regionalism. Engaging with the functionalist approach to regionalism, Ahmed undertakes an analysis of SAARC based on the hypothesis that cooperation in low politics can provide space for engagement in high politics and towards regional security which is the ultimate goal behind the creation of this South Asian regional identity.

Using the functionalist lens, the book is divided into nine distinct chapters encapsulating the rationale and need for the creation of a South Asian regional entity, its formation and the vast array of issues that the organization deals with including trends in economic, environmental, food water and energy insecurities as well as transnational crimes in South Asia. In response to the central problem within the SAARC

i.e. the dynamics of the Indo-Pak conflict affecting regionalism, the volume aims in the words of the author “to work beyond the India-Pakistan conflict for regionalism in South Asia and attempts to arrive at a more realistic and balanced approach to studying regionalism through the window of SAARC’s actions and challenges.”

The first two chapters titled Introduction to South Asia and SAARC: an overview present the historical and contemporary analyses of intra-state and inter-state conflicts in South Asia and introduces succinctly South Asia as a region with common cultural, historical and political linkages and builds grounds for the rationale behind the creation of the SAARC. The chapter brings to light the bilateral conflicts and attempts at conflict resolution (Indus waters treaty, water sharing treaty between India and Bangladesh) between South Asian states. It also talks about the increasing levels of militarisation as evident from high defence spending in most countries. Moving on, the chapter on SAARC explores the motivations and processes that led to the creation of SAARC and the inspiring factors behind the formation of the association and members’ attitudes towards external linkages – both between countries and with multi-lateral organizations. It also looks at agendas put forth by the SAARC Charter and the different areas of cooperation that were identified as well as the structure and hierarchy of SAARC. It brings to the fore the unique feature of the SAARC charter that makes a provision for sub-regionalism. In addition to sub-regionalism SAARC has also expanded to include Afghanistan and extend observer membership to countries from other regions. Another distinctive feature identified by Ahmed is “informal SAARC which has been significant because it allows for political consensus to emerge on issues outside the official purview of SAARC for instance meetings between heads of states when bilateral relations are soured.”

The following four chapters in the volume deal with South Asian cooperation in economic, environmental, human welfare and traditional security issues. Looking closely at the pace and development of economic integration in South Asia, Ahmed undertakes a critical analysis of the South Asian

Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA) and its successor the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). He highlights the history of trade relations in South Asia, the apprehensions of smaller economies about India's economic clout and the inability of the countries and the SAARC mechanisms to rise beyond bilateral differences and realise the benefits of a viable economic partnership through the SAARC/SAFTA framework.

While the economic integration of South Asia remains incomplete, Ahmed postulates that SAARC has had a significant impact on the issues of environmental security. Realising the perils of climate change, deforestation and natural disasters, SAARC countries have taken several initiatives to work together to assure environmental security through initiatives beginning with the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) in 1982 to the more recent SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment signed in 2010. According to Ahmed, while SAARC initiatives on environmental security demonstrate considerable cooperation both at regional and global levels, much more needs to be done to improve South Asian capacity in dealing with issues of the environment which are paramount especially for smaller countries like the Maldives.

The chapter on Human welfare looks at the role of SAARC in promoting regional cooperation in areas of food and health security, education and poverty alleviation – issues that need attention in the developing economies of South Asia. While Initiatives like the setting up of the South Asian University (SAU) are laudable, human development indices continue to be low in South Asia and the SAARC framework remains limited and vastly unimplemented owing to lack of resources.

The chapter that looks at cooperation in security matters is interesting as this is the one agenda that SAARC nations have struggled to keep out of the purview of the regional body. Committed to non-interference in bilateral matters as stipulated in the SAARC charter, the SAARC countries have had to deal with several threats to security including transnational crimes such as terrorism, weapons and drugs smuggling across state borders, human trafficking, illegal migration and illegal trade. While SAARC has attempted to

bring about cooperation to jointly tackle these concerns, efforts continue to be stymied by bilateral disputes and individualistic and nationalistic interests.

In the final chapter, Ahmed attempts to compare the SAARC with another example of regional cooperation from the neighbourhood – that is the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Through this chapter Ahmed attempts to draw lessons from ASEAN in areas of economic cooperation, political and security cooperation and conflict management mechanisms that could also be applied in SAARC making it a more effective regional body. Some of the lessons that the author identifies include: need to integrate professionals into institutions; value of symbolic agreements aimed at trust-building and learning from the ASEAN's success in promoting intra-regional trade through the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) – an area where ASEAN has been very successful.

By the author's admission the book attempts to fill an existing gap in literature by encompassing issues of regionalism and regional security in South Asia and by underlining the role and concerns of the smaller South Asian countries. Using the functionalist approach it tackles a vast array of issues that the SAARC has grappled with over the years and the challenges towards achieving a regional consensus. A common strand throughout the study is the inability of the SAARC countries to move beyond bilateral conflicts and their nationalistic goals. India's dominant position and apprehensions of smaller states and the India-Pakistan conflict in particular continues to be a constant irritant in the successful implementation of many noble initiatives and vitiates the atmosphere hindering mutual trust and understanding. Another crucial challenge to the SAARC is the integration of Afghanistan as a new member owing to its political and economic instability. The author concludes his analyses at the argument he begins with, that is there is a gulf between rhetoric and implementation in the SAARC framework and it lacks the resources and commitments required to be a viable regional entity and continues to be influenced by bilateral disputes and conflicting interests of member-states.

Stuti Bhatnagar

The book presents a very detailed analysis of SAARC history and its engagement with key issues of concern to developing South Asian economies and societies. It brings to light the complex debates that were responsible for the creation of the SAARC and the initiative of member countries to rise above their differences and work together to create a sustainable South Asian identity. One of the foremost positives of the volume is the author's firsthand experience at SAARC headquarters in Nepal providing insights beyond formal government speeches and proclamations and giving an insider view of the functioning of a complex and evolving regional mechanism. Ahmed also succeeds in critically engaging with complex issues and myriad formal structures set up by the SAARC, both within the region as well as the SAARC's engagement at the international stage. However, there are certain elements of the book that require more. Though the book is published in 2013, most of the data is limited to 2009-2010 – a more updated version perhaps would have been more insightful, especially considering the volatility of the political environment in South Asia. In addition, while the author looks at the ASEAN and talks about other regional groupings that the SAARC member states are involved with for instance the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), it does not talk about the BRICS group of which India is an important member and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) where India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are members and how this would impact the SAARC or offer opportunities to further regional cooperation. With India taking the lead through the BRICS and the promulgation of the BRICS Development Bank, its regional position would perhaps become stronger and how this would impact SAARC could be a possible area of study – maybe for another edition of this volume.

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