

Next frontier

It is high time Saarc member states built mutual trust and confidence among themselves



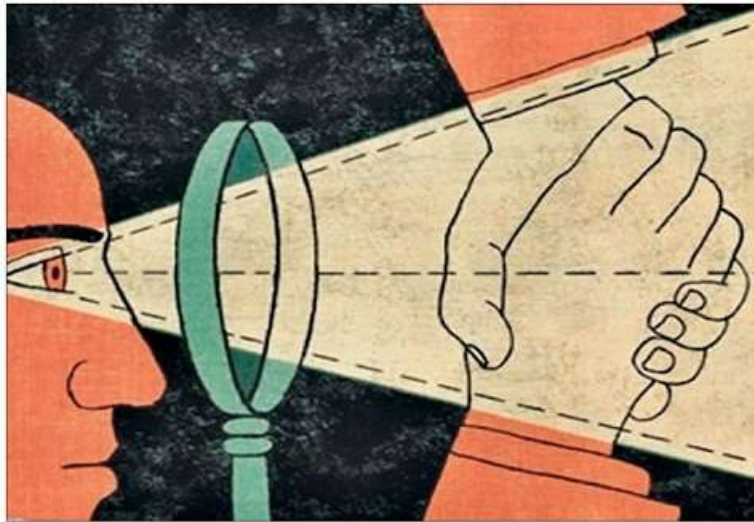
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The upcoming Saarc Summit and the making of a new constitution are currently the talk of the town in Nepal. But while the Summit has begun smoothly, political party leaders are still unable to reach consensus on the constitution-making process. So people are eagerly looking forward to the outcomes of the Summit as Prime Minister Sushil Koirala has said, the success of the Saarc Summit is attached to the prestige and image of Nepal.

Agreements that connect

As the host country of the 18th Summit, Nepal wants to make sure that everything goes as planned: hosting the heads of state and government and their security arrangements, statements and discussions at the Summit, signing of three agreements, the retreat at Dhulikhel, and the Kathmandu Declaration at the end. Bilateral agreements, including pacts that will make Kathmandu and Varanasi; Janakpur and Ayodhya; and Lumbini and Bodhgaya sister cities are also expected to be signed on the sidelines of the Summit.

At the Summit, Saarc leaders are expected to sign three other agreements: a framework agreement on energy cooperation, an agreement on motor vehicles, and another on railways. While the proposed motor and another railway agreements would improve land connectivity in South Asia, the agreement on energy cooperation would work as an umbrella agreement for energy trade in the region. It will also help in developing energy-related infrastructure like cross-border transmission lines, power grids and other infrastructure required for energy trade by reducing customs tariff and extending preferential access to the markets of member countries. Thus, these agreements could truly help the region realise the theme of this year's Summit "deeper integration for peace and prosperity".



Common cause

Saarc was established in 1985 for member states to collaborate in economic, technical, and scientific fields, increase people-to-people contact, cooperate for economic growth, and improve the quality of life of the people in the region. As stated in the Guiding Principle of Saarc, its members are expected to respect each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and strengthen equality and collective self-reliance. In order to improve the quality of life and achieve economic growth, the member states further planned to work together to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and various diseases in the region.

In spite of the above commitments, the region continues to face problems of food security, poverty, illiteracy, inadequate health facilities, natural disasters, and under-developed infrastructure. These problems have remained unresolved mainly due to prolonged political instability, civil conflicts, terrorism, and corruption in member countries, which has impacted the entire region.

Though the political environment in the region is getting better, recent border skir-



KATHMANDU SUMMIT

mishes between India and Pakistan and tensions caused by terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan could be problematic. Then there's the issue of Bhutanese refugees between Bhutan and Nepal while Kashmir remains a bone of contention between India and Pakistan.

Nonetheless, that India and Pakistan have to play positive lead roles for Saarc to progress has long been established. The good news is that current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed his full support for the Saarc process and has attached the highest level of priority to improve relations and foster cooperation between the member states. He has stated that Saarc nations should identify specific areas of common challenges and opportunities and work together to foster region-wide cooperation by promoting regional connectivity and integration.

Though challenges to meeting these goals are many, so are the opportunities. The region is blessed with abundant natural resources, a huge human resource, and a rich culture. Twenty percent of the world population (1.45 out of 7.16 billion people) inhabit this region. Two nuclear power

countries, India and Pakistan, are also members of this regional body. However, the mistrust and lack of confidence among these two big countries have overshadowed the progress and prosperity of Saarc. In comparison to other regional bodies, such as the European Union (EU), Asean, Arab League, and Southern African Development Cooperation, Saarc has not progressed as anticipated.

Moving on

Saarc leaders are committed to resolving common issues. They have signed conventions on food security and agreed to establish an emergency reserve food bank, along with the suppression of terrorism and disaster management. As per the South Asian Free Trade Area Agreement, member states are also striving to increase trade among themselves and cut down excise duties. And as the region is prone to natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and earthquake, it is an opportune time to revive the pending issue of forming a regional body to deal with emergency relief. The G-20 countries recently made a promise at the Sydney Summit to add \$2 trillion to the global GDP, promising freer trade and more investment in infrastructure. Saarc nations should make an effort to benefit from such initiatives.

The Kathmandu Summit provides an opportunity for Saarc nations to learn from each others' experiences and to reiterate previous commitments. For instance, energy is crucial for economic growth. In South Asia, Bhutan and Nepal are well-endowed with water resources, which can be used to generate energy. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan could be potential markets to sell electricity and manage a regional grid. Similarly, waterways between Bangladesh and India and the Ganga river between India and Nepal could be a promising avenue to increase bilateral trade.

The time has come for all member states to work towards building mutual trust and confidence (particularly between India and Pakistan); connecting with each other for economic growth; improving people-to-people contact by easing visa regimes; and strengthening cooperation to fight against social crimes and terrorism in the region.

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