

“Building Stronger Partnerships to Prevent Terrorism,” Conference Organized by the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, Washington, DC

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SAARC as a Regional Mechanism to Counter Terrorism

It is clear that SAARC was able to make a very good beginning at the initial stage but it failed to evolve itself as an effective regional mechanism to respond to the challenges of terrorism.

Mindful of the precarious nature of the political set-up in the region, the founders of SAARC adopted a very cautious approach, and therefore, bilateral and contentious issues were excluded from the deliberations of SAARC. However, at the first SAARC Summit itself, the late Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene took a bold step in raising the issue of terrorism, which was clearly a political and security related issue. At this point some criticized Sri Lanka’s initiative saying that the persistence on such political and controversial issues would weaken the association which was yet in its formative period. However, a “study group” was set up to examine in depth the problem of terrorism as it affects the security and stability of SAARC countries and come up with recommendations. At the Third Summit held in Katmandu in November 1987, the Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism was adopted. Given this background, it was creditable that SAARC was able to enact a convention on a very controversial subject within the first two years of its existence. Subsequently, several other conventions were adopted but they were not effectively implemented due to the lack of political will and determination on the part of political leaders in the region.

What are the measures that need to be taken in order to make SAARC more effective as a regional mechanism to counter terrorism. There are several proposals but I would like to highlight three suggestions. The first two propose that SAARC should reform from within. The third proposal advocates the creation of a new mechanism “**which may be complimentary but not formally related to SAARC.**”

1. Some have suggested that SAARC should develop its own security mechanism to deal with security issues. In his regard, South Asia can learn lessons from the experiences of other regions. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) provides a model for a comprehensive and common security for Europe. Other regions have also developed mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The OSCE has a very complex structure, and as a beginner, SAARC may not yet be ready to have such an elaborate network. However, SAARC can emulate the example of the ASEAN Regional Forum. If such a “**formal security mechanism**” can be established, it will enhance the operational capability of SAARC to deal effectively with terrorism.¹ It should be noted that some of the South Asian countries have gained membership in other regional forums where

¹ Niaz A. Naik, “Security Organization for South Asia (SOSA): Mechanism for Conflict Resolution in South Asia,” Sridhar K. Khatri and Gert W. Kueck (eds.), *Terrorism in South Asia: Impact on Development and Democratic Process*, Delhi: Shirpa Publications, 2003, PP. 449-461.

discussions are taking place on issues such as terrorism, cross border crimes, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Five South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka) are members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The problem with BIMSTEC is that Pakistan is not a member of this organization. Compared to ARF, BIMSTEC is not a very effective organization.

2. The second proposal is to make use of a certain practice which is already in existence. Even though bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from formal deliberations, SAARC has developed the practice of having informal consultations on controversial bilateral issues on the fringes summit meetings. Such informal exchanges of views have helped on many an occasion diffuse tension between states in their bilateral dealings. In fact, the 9th SAARC Summit in Male and the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad reiterated the importance of continuing informal political consultations as a way of promoting mutual understanding and confidence building. The report of the “Group of Eminent Persons” (GEP) has also recommended that SAARC should continue and operationalize the process of having informal political consultations. However, no measures have yet been taken to operationalize this arrangement.²
3. It has been proposed that **“a regional, technically focused counter-counter terrorism mechanism – which may be complimentary but not formally related to SAARC – should be established to stimulate practical cooperation at the functional level.”**³ This proposal has several advantages and the viability of this proposal should be fully explored. SAARC can learn from the experience of other regions which have successfully established such counter-terrorism training centers such as the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation(JCLEC) in South-East Asia and Intergovernmental Authority on Development Capacity Building Program Against Terrorism (ICPAT) in Horn of Africa. Countries outside the region can help SAARC in many ways: exchange of technical expertise and information; training for capacity building; sharing of best practices and experience etc. This new mechanism can fulfill a number of requirements which SAARC has not been able to do so far.
 - The SAARC Secretariat does not have adequate resources or expertise to launch a coherent and well-coordinated anti-terrorist strategy on its own. SAARC has not yet developed a common data base for sharing intelligence and information.
 - Because of its technical focus, the proposed new mechanism would be more acceptable to governments in the region. The new mechanism should develop its identity as a part of the region by forging links with academic institutions and Think Tanks in the region dealing with security issues.

² *Assessing and Reformulating SAARC Road Map* (SACEPS Paper No. 18), Kathmandu, 2008, pp.52-53.

³ Eric Rosand, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Jason Ipe , *Countering Terrorism in South asia: Strengthening Multilateral Engagement*, (A Report of the Center for Global Counterterrorism Cooperation & International Peace Institute, 2009), P. 25.

- When the governments realize the usefulness of this new institution, they will begin to seek its support despite their initial reservations. For example, the USAID supported a civil society organization (WANEP – West African Network for Peacebuilding) to establish an Early Warning- Early Response System to monitor ongoing conflicts in Western Africa. The ECOWAS (Economic Community of the West African States) has very positively responded to the data bank created by WANEP.
- A high degree of overall preparedness is necessary in view of the transnational nature of modern terrorism. SAARC Council of Ministers, at its 31st Session held in February 2009, has declared that “we agree to consider the development of an **integrated border management mechanism**.” Therefore, there is a need to create an integrated mechanism capable gathering information/intelligence relating to national security.
- A decision was taken at the Fourteenth Session of SAARC Council of Ministers, held in Dhaka in July 1994, to establish a data bank and a dissemination centre in Sri Lanka with focal points in other member countries. Certain mechanisms established for this purpose are also not very effective. Two units (**STOMD & SDOMD**) were established in Colombo for the purpose of gathering collating, analyzing, and disseminating information about terrorist activities, their tactics, strategies, and methods. It appears that SAARC countries are hesitant to exchange information due to mutual distrust and suspicions prevailing among them. As Sri Lanka’s Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama said at the Second Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Interior/Home in October 2007:

“The SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk must play, as it was intended to, a vital role in disseminating information on terrorist groups and their activities in the region. Unfortunately, the objectives of the establishment of the desk have so far not been fully realized, as the flow of information from member countries remains irregular or even nil....”⁴

Other suggestions

1. Because of the brutal and ruthless nature of modern terrorism, the military dimension has dominated the policy as well as the popular discourse on counter-terrorism and the need for treating the root causes of the problem has received less attention. The intense engagement with terrorism seems to have subdued the agenda of human rights, good governance, and political reforms in South Asia. The war on terror should not be waged at the expense of democratic freedoms as it would be very counter-productive at the end.
2. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy has adopted a holistic approach towards counter-terrorism and it has a four-pillar plan of action. It was adopted by consensus in the UN General Assembly in 2006, and as such, all the SAARC countries have endorsed it. However, SAARC countries have not paid equal attention to all four pillars of the action program, particularly the fourth pillar - commitment to uphold the rule of law and

⁴ http://www.slmfa.gov.lk/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1040 , accessed on 29.05.2009.

human rights. Therefore, SAARC approach to counter terrorism remains mostly a “security and law-enforcement approach.”

3. The UN counter-terrorism strategy has placed emphasis not only on “state security” but also on “human security” When these two are not sufficiently balanced, the four-pillar action program tends to become distorted. For example, the “building of state’s capacity” (under the third pillar) does not mean only the strengthening of the capacity of law enforcement agencies to deal with terrorist threats. It also includes a host of other things such as the strengthening the state’s capacity to deliver goods and services to the people, capacity of criminal justice officials to perform their functions while upholding the values of human rights and the rule of law, human rights education for security forces etc.
4. In this conference where we talk of “*Building Stronger Partnership to Prevent Terrorism*” it should be emphasized that there should be a healthy interaction and partnership between SAARC and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). However, it should first start within the national boundaries. In some countries there is tension between the state and CSO/NGOs which has restricted political space for these organizations engage in their work. This is true even with international organizations, including UN agencies.