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SAARC Summits 1985-2016: The Cancellation Phenomenon

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Abstract

The article explores causes of the frequent cancellation of SAARC Summits and analyses its impact on the process of regional cooperation. The Summit gives regional leaders an opportunity to meet regularly and provides them an environment to deliberate on issues of common interests; decide on matters related to regional cooperation and bilateral issues in formal or informal meetings; start or resume talks and negotiate or sign agreements. SAARC members, however, have not benefitted from this forum due to its frequent cancellation. The SAARC Charter precludes discussion of contentious issues and bilateral political problems at its meetings in order to prevent the organisation from being adversely affected. However, the very existence of such problems among regional states, especially India's tense relations with other members, keep derailing the SAARC train. Over the years, domestic issues and internal political conditions of member states also caused postponement of the annual Summits.

Key words: Regional Institutional Failures, South Asia Forums/ Association, Hegemony, Cooperation.

Introduction

The SAARC Summit meeting constitutes the highest forum of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. It is meant to provide leaders of South Asian Countries (SACs) an opportunity to meet regularly and interact directly in order to move the process of regionalism[1] forward. The leaders of SACs, particularly smaller regional

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[1] Editor's Note: Understood here as 'a political process marked by cooperation and policy coordination'. Edward D. Mansfield and Etel Solingen, "Regionalism," *Annual Review*

countries (SRCs), attach high expectations to this forum. A few SAARC Summits have produced highly fruitful outcomes as they provided regional leaders the appropriate environment and ample opportunities, through direct and personal talks – free of bureaucratic formalities and official hurdles – to sort out their common or bilateral problems and issues. Occasionally, such meetings resulted in breakthroughs in members' bilateral relations[2] or helped them to defuse tensions.[3] These meetings also created the atmosphere to start[4] or resume negotiations[5] and to reach or

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of Political Science 13 (2010): 145-163, http://www.waseda.jp/gsaps/eaui/educational_program/PDF_2/KU_KIM%20DongHun_Reading2_Regionalism.pdf.

[2] Kishore C. Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (London: Routledge, 2008), 98–99, 101; Ross Masood Hussain, "SAARC 1985–1995: Review and Analysis of Progress," *South Asian Survey* 3, no. 1 & 2 (1996): 7-23 (18–19). For instance, in 1988 and 2004, Indian Prime Ministers (Rajiv Gandhi and Vajpayee, respectively) came to Islamabad to attend the Fourth and Twelfth Summit, respectively. On both occasions, meetings on the sidelines laid the foundation for peace between the two countries.

[3] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 101; and, Kripa Sridharan, "Regional Organisations and Conflict Management: Comparing ASEAN and SAARC" (paper 2, no.3, Crises States Research Centre, London, 2008), 13. For instance, the Tenth Summit held in Colombo on July 29–31, 1998 provided on its sidelines the leadership of India and Pakistan the chance to defuse tensions after the nuclear explosions by both countries in May 1998. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee also agreed to resume talks that culminated in the Lahore Declaration in February 1999. In January 2002, the meeting between President Musharraf and Premier Vajpayee on the sidelines of the Kathmandu Summit, to some extent, helped cool down the tensions after a militant attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001.

[4] Arndt Michael, "Sovereignty vs. Security: SAARC and its Role in the Regional Security Architecture in South Asia," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2013): 37-45 (42); Douglas C. Makeig, "War, No-War, and the India-Pakistan Negotiating Process," *Pacific Affairs* 60, no. 2, (1987): 271-294 (291). Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq met Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi on the sidelines of the first Summit held in Dhaka on December 7–8, 1985, and discussed bilateral problems including the Siachen glacier issue. After their one–on–one meeting, both leaders publicly announced not to attack each other's nuclear installations. Both countries started bilateral talks and signed an agreement to this effect on the eve of the Fourth Summit in Islamabad in 1988. On Gandhi's invitation, Zia-ul-Haq visited India a week later. During the visit, both leaders agreed to start defence secretary level talks on Siachen. Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 91; Robert G. Wirsing, *War or Peace on the Line of Control? The India – Pakistan Dispute over Kashmir Turns Fifty* (Durham: University of Durham, 1998), 26.

[5] R. Vasudevan, "India, Pakistan Agree to Resume Dialogue at Foreign Ministers' Level," *Asian Tribune*, April 30, 2010, http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/04/30/india-pakistan-agree-resume-dialogue-foreign-ministers%E2%80%99-level.
For instance, Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani and his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh in a meeting at the Sixteenth Summit held in Thimphu, Bhutan in

sign bilateral and regional agreements.[6]

Despite various successes, such as those mentioned above, and effectiveness of Summits to help improve the overall regional political environment, SACs have not fully utilised this forum due to different reasons, one of them being its frequent and arbitrary cancellation on one pretext or another. For instance, SAARC has held only 18 Summits in the last 31 years since its inception in 1985. Prevailing political problems and bilateral disputes of SACs have mainly caused delays. However, no systematic attempt has been made to investigate the real and immediate causes of its recurrent deferment. This study briefly surveys the process of South Asian regionalism and provides an overview of the SAARC Charter and practices. It then strives to fill the gap by investigating the actual and proximate causes of Summit cancellations and the impact on regionalism.

South Asian Regionalism

SAARC was officially launched in the first ever Summit held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on December 8, 1985. Its main objective is to promote the well-being of South Asian people and enhance their quality of life by fostering economic growth and strengthen SAC's collective self-reliance. SAARC identified various areas of cooperation in different fields such as agriculture and rural development; science and technology; meteorology; transport; telecommunications; biotechnology; environment and forestry; tourism; energy; women, youth and children; health and population; education, arts, culture and sports; and intellectual property rights etc.[7]

April 2010, decided to revive the peace process, halted since the Bombay incident of November 26, 2008, between the two countries. The process was resumed in February 2011.

[6] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 102; Hussain, "SAARC 1985–1995: Review and Analysis of Progress," 18-19; Makeig, "War, No-War and the India-Pakistan Negotiating Process," 291. For instance, on the eve of the Fourth Summit, India and Pakistan signed several agreements including the one to not attack each other's nuclear installations. The agreement was ready for signature since 1986. In 2004, on the eve of the Islamabad Summit, SAARC members signed SAFTA.

[7] "SAARC in Brief," *South Asian Survey* 2, no. 1 (1995): 119-140 (123–131); SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC: A Profile*, (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 2004), 10–11. Also see SAARC Secretariat, "Area of Cooperation," accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=54#.

In order to advance its objectives, SAARC took several initiatives, concluded various agreements and conventions and set up regional centres in different member countries and the South Asian University (SAU) established in India in 2010.[8] By 2014, it had 11 regional centres, but the fourteenth Summit decided to shut down some of them. Thus, by 2016, some closed down and some were merged together to bring their number down to five.[9] SAARC also set up a food reserve in 1987 and a food bank in 2007 to ensure food security.[10] It strived to create common regional (South Asian) identity symbolising the unity and oneness of the region, by promoting people-to-people contacts through promotion of regional tourism; exchange of students, academics, journalists, artists, and other professional groups and members of civil society organisations; increased involvement of private sector in various SAARC activities, and; creation of regional bodies and forums, known as SAARC Apex Bodies, besides promotion of sports, arts and cultural cooperation.[11] In 2004, at the Islamabad Summit, SAARC also adopted a Social Charter for the welfare of women, children, disabled, and youth.[12]

SAARC made significant progress towards trade liberalisation and economic integration. It concluded agreements on South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993 and South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2004. To further this process, members signed several other agreements such as those on establishment of the SAARC Arbitration Council in 2005; Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters in 2005; Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters in 2005; the establishment of South Asian

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[8] SAARC took decision to establish SAU in the Fourteenth Summit held in New Delhi in 2007. SAU started its first academic session in 2010. For further details, see SAU's official website; http://www.sau.int/.

[9] "SAARC Centres Reduced to 5 from 11," *Kathmandu Post*, June 12, 2016, http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-01-12/saarc-centres-reduced-to-5-from-11.html.

[10] SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits, 1985–1988* (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 1990), 151, 153, 209 and 215; SAARC Secretariat, "Declaration of Fourteenth SAARC Summit," April 3-4, 2007, http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/14%20-%20New%20Delhi,%2014th%20Summit%203-4%20April%202007.pdf.

[11] For details see SAARC Secretariat, "Area of Cooperation: People-to-People Contacts" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, n.d.), accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=52.

[12] SAARC Secretariat, "SAARC Social Charter" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, n.d.), accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=7.

Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO) in 2008; Trade in Services in 2010 and Energy Cooperation (Electricity) in 2014.[13]

SAARC areas of cooperation also include terrorism, narco-trade and criminal matters.[14] It concluded a Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (RCST) in 1987; Additional Protocol to RCST in 2004; Convention on Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances in 1990; and a Convention on Mutual Assistance on Criminal Matters in 2008.

However, SAARC has not been able to put into practice many of its decisions and realise its commitments and promises.[15] Several government officials have also pointed out this failure. For instance, M. R. Acharya, a former foreign secretary of Nepal summed it up in these words:

> We have oceans of documents, ideas, proposals and studies. But we have hardly implemented them. After twenty years, we don't have one regional project that has a SAARC trademark.

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[13] SAARC Secretariat, "Agreements and Conventions" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, n.d.), accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/SAARC-Conventions/63/; SAARC Secretariat, "Agreements" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, n.d.), accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/Agreements/69/.

[14] Mussarat Jabeen and Ishtiaq A. Choudhry, "Role of SAARC for Countering Terrorism in South Asia," *South Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2013), 389-403 (392–394). Also see SAARC Secretariat, "Area of Cooperation: Security Aspects" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, n.d.), accessed March 24, 2017, http://saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=59.

[15] E. Sudhakar, *SAARC: Origin, Growth and Future* (Lahore: Book Traders, 1994), 200. For instance, SAARC countries signed regional conventions on suppression of terrorism but their mutual cooperation in this field is insignificant. They also signed a regional convention to prevent child and women trafficking for prostitution and to bring an end to this menace, but SAARC members practically did nothing substantial to achieve this goal. Decisions made in Summits are hardly implemented and thus, in the words of Sudhakar, 'remained as pious precepts confined to pieces of paper and slogans.' Thirteenth SAARC Summit, "Dhaka Declaration," November 13, 2005, sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/13%20-%20Dhaka%20-%2013th%20Summit%2012-13%20Nov%202005.pdf. In fact, SAARC itself recognises this failure and some of its Summit declarations too pointed out this fact. For instance, recognising the failure of SAARC in achieving its goals and implementation of agreed programmes in many fields, the Thirteenth Summit, held in 2006, 'directed all SAARC institutions and mechanisms to work collectively towards a decade dedicated to implementation.' SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits: (1990–1995),* vol. 2, (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 1996), 124; SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Documents: Milestones in the Evolution of Regional Cooperation in South Asia (August 1995 – July 1998),* vol.6 (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 1998), 367 and 380. Earlier, in 1995, SAARC Council of Ministers had noted that the organisation had 'matured as an institution' but it was still away from meeting its stated goals.

> As one foreign minister joked SAARC may soon become NATO: No Action Talk Only.[16]

It did not meet its targets set for the year 2000 such as those related to universal vaccination of children and primary education, child and mother nutrition, provision of clean water and shelter, and poverty alleviation.[17] SAARC members also fell short of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[18]

In sum, SAARC as a collective body has not brought visible change in the lives of South Asian people. The causes of this failure can be attributed to many factors such as having overambitious and unrealistic targets without understanding the severity of the problems,[19] lack of commitment on the part of regional leadership,[20] financial constraints, and lack of priority given to socioeconomic development as compared to military and security considerations by SACs.[21]

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[16] Cited by Lok Raj Baral, "Cooperation with Realism: The Future of South Asian Regionalism," *South Asian Survey* 13, no. 2 (2006): 265-275 (266).

[17] SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits*, 95, 211 and 214. SAARC had agreed to achieve the targets of general vaccination by 1990, child and maternal nutrition, access to safe drinking water and shelter and universal primary education by the 2000. The fourth Summit had launched the 'SAARC–2000–A Basic Needs Perspective' and called for a plan to achieve targets by the end of the century in the fields of food, clothing, shelter, education, health and population and environment. However, none of these targets were achieved either on the set date or even till now.

[18] UN, *The Millennium Development Goals Report: 2015* (New York: United Nations, 2015); India met four out of eight targets. Vidya Venkat, "India yet to Achieve UN Millennium Development Goals," *Hindu*, September 15, 2015, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-yet-to-achieve-un-millennium-development-goals/article7654764.ece.

[19] Michael Clemens and Todd Moss, "What's Wrong with the Millennium Development Goals?" (brief, Center for Global Development, Washington, D.C., 2005), 2–4, https://www.cgdev.org/files/3940_file_WWMGD.pdf.

[20] Yussuf A. Harun, "Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Bangladesh Perspective," in *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia: Beyond SAFTA*, eds. Sadiq Ahmed, Saman Kelegama, and Ejaz Ghani (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2010), 283–285; Kamal Raj Dhungel, "Regional Energy Trade in South Asia: Problems and Prospects," *South Asia Economic Journal* 9, no.1 (2008): 173-193 (186–187).

[21] See, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, "Security and Democracy in a Nuclear India," in *India: Development and Participation*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Akmal Hussain, "A Perspective on Peace and Economic Cooperation in South Asia," in *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia: Beyond SAFTA*, eds. Sadiq Ahmed, Saman Kelegama, and Ejaz Ghani (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2010), 12; and C. R. Reddy, "Indo-Pak Defence Spending," *South Asian Journal*, no.3 (2004): 124–231.

SAARC Summits: Charter Provisions and Practices of Regional States

The supreme authority of SAARC lies with heads of state or government who, according to the Charter as signed on December 8, 1985, should meet 'once a year or more often as and when considered necessary by the Member States.' Council of Ministers (CoM) is the second highest and main decision–making body of SAARC. Besides other responsibilities, CoM reviews in its Inter-Summit Sessions (ISS) progress on Summit decisions and finalises its agenda, dates and venue. The SAARC Standing Committee (SSC) and SAARC Steering Committee, comprising of foreign secretaries and senior officials, respectively, are other important bodies. SAARC also has six technical committees (TCs) and four working groups, comprising of experts in different areas to help identify, prepare, implement and monitor programmes and activities in various areas of cooperation, now known as the Regional Integrated Programme of Action (RIPA).

Summits are supposed to be held on rotational basis based on the alphabetic order of all member states (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). Each Summit ends with a declaration that also includes the announcement of the venue and schedule of the next Summit. The participation of every member is mandatory for convening the Summit.[22]

Postponement of SAARC Summits

Dhaka was honoured to host the first ever Summit because of its pioneer role in South Asian regionalism as it was President Zia of Bangladesh who had initially given the idea of SAARC.[23] During the final stages of the preparatory work (1981–1985) to launch SAARC, Bangladesh offered to host the first Summit which was accepted. The reason behind this was evident and was also noted by the foreign secretaries of SACs in these words:

[22] "SAARC Inter-Summit Postponed Once Again," *Himalayan Times*, February 22, 2013.
[23] Lawrence Sáez, *The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): An Emerging Collaboration Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 12-13.

> [Dhaka was]… appropriately selected as the venue of first Summit, particularly in view of Bangladesh's initiative in launching the South Asian Regional Cooperation. [24]

The first Summit was held at the end of 1985 (December 7–8) when SAARC was officially launched. Since then, only 18 Summits have been held, i.e. ten in the first 15 years (1986 – 2000) and eight in next 15 years (2001 – 2016). This shows more frequent cancellations over the last 14-15 years: 1989, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016.[25] Out of the 18 Summits that SAARC has so far organised, only five were held on previously announced dates and venues, while five others could only be convened after reshuffling their venues and eight after changing their scheduled or expected dates. The Summits were deferred for different time periods, ranging from six weeks to over two years, on one pretext or another.

Since the SAARC Charter does not provide for compensating a delayed Summit, delay of a moot for even a few weeks or months disturbs the entire calendar and affects the schedule of every subsequent meeting, as reflected in Table 1:

[24] SAARC Secretariat, *From SARC to SAARC: Milestones in the Evolution of Regional Cooperation in South Asia (1980 – 1988)*, vol. 1 (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 1988), 83.

[25] In 2015, it was neither scheduled nor expected due to an amendment in the SAARC Charter that now provides holding the Summit after two years.

Table-1
SAARC Calendar

Summits	Scheduled/Expected Dates* and Venue	Actual Date and Venue
First	Dec. 1985, Dhaka	Dec. 7–8, 1985, Dhaka
Second	Nov. 16–17, 1986	Nov. 16–17, 1986, Bangalore
Third	1987, Thimphu	Nov. 2–4, 1987, Kathmandu
Fourth	1988, Colombo	Dec. 29–31, 1988, Islamabad
Fifth	1989, Colombo	Nov. 21–23, 1990, Malé
Sixth	Nov. 7–9, 1991, Colombo	Dec. 21, 1991, Colombo
Seventh	Dec. 1992, Dhaka	Apr. 10–11, 1993, Dhaka
Eighth	1994, New Delhi	May 2–4, 1995, New Delhi
Ninth	1996, Malé	May 12–14, 1997, Malé
Tenth	July 29–31, 1998, Colombo	July 29–31, 1998, Colombo
Eleventh	i) Nov. 1999, Kathmandu	Jan. 4–6, 2002, Kathmandu
	ii) 2000, Kathmandu	
	iii) 2001, Kathmandu	
Twelfth	Jan. 2003, Islamabad	Jan. 4 – 6, 2004, Islamabad
Thirteenth	a. Jan. 9–11, 2005, Dhaka	Nov. 12 – 13, 2005, Dhaka
	b. Feb. 6–7, 2005, Dhaka	
Fourteenth	April 3–4, 2007, New Delhi	April 3–4, 2007, New Delhi
Fifteenth	2008, Malé	August 2–3, 2008, Colombo
Sixteenth	Sept. 2009, Malé	April 28–29, 2010, Thimphu
Seventeenth	Nov. 10–11, 2011, Addu City	Nov. 10–11, 2011, Addu City
Eighteenth	i) Nov.–Dec. 2012, Kathmandu	Nov. 26–27, 20014 , Kathmandu
	ii) Nov.–Dec. 2013, Kathmandu	
Nineteenth	Nov. 09-10, 2016, Islamabad	New dates are yet to be announced.

* Where exact dates/months were undecided, only years have been mentioned.

Causes of Cancellation

There have been numerous causes of recurrent postponement/cancellation of SAARC Summits. The most significant among them include members' bilateral disputes; political problems and contentious issues, with India being a party in almost all of them; members' internal problems such as political instability, unrest, general elections, insurgencies, and economic recessions; lack of adequate infrastructure and resources on the part of some SRCs to organise the regional event; and natural calamities. Stubbornness on the part of some of SRCs such as their refusal to organise (Sri Lanka) or attend (Bhuttan besides India) the moot also undermined the Summit process.

On India's insistence, SACs included Article 10 in the Charter, at the time of inception of the organisation in 1985, that precludes discussion of contentious issues and bilateral problems at all SAARC meetings in order to protect the organisation from being affected by them.[26] However, the very existence of contentious issues, bilateral disputes and political problems among SACs has been the 'most common reason' for cancellations. Since, India is involved in most, if not all, of these disputes, thus, in most cases, 'India–related issues' were the chief causes of Summit cancellations.[27]

First Decade (1986–1995)

The Summit process has suffered since the very early days of SAARC. In the first decade (1986–1995), only seven Summits were held and the regional moot could not take place in 1989, 1992 and 1994. The venues in 1987 and 1988 were changed, while the meeting in 1990 was held after a diplomatic battle between Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In 1991, the Summit was held after a delay of four months. These Summits mostly suffered due to strained relations of SAARC members, especially India. Infrastructural and economic problems of SRCs also affected the process.

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[26] Mavara Inayat, "The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation," in *Regionalism in South Asian Diplomacy*, eds. Alyson J. K. Bailes, John Gooneratne, Mavara Inayat, Jamshed Ayaz Khan and Swaran Singh (policy paper 15, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm, 2007), 19.

[27] Ugo Caruso, "Comprehensive Security in South Asia: SAARC and the Applicability of OSCE Standards," in *Minority Rights in South Asia*, eds. Rainer Hofmann and Ugo Caruso (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 179.

Members' Economic Problems

The Summit process suffered for the first time just within a year since launching the organisation when Bhutan was unable to host the third Summit. Earlier, at the first Summit it had been decided to convene the second and third moot in India and Bhutan in 1986 and 1987, respectively. The Second Summit held in Bangalore, India on November 16–17, 1986, recognised Bhutan's inability to organise due to lack of infrastructure and financial resources needed to host such a big event,[28] and so it was decided to shift the venue of the next moot to Kathmandu, Nepal (November 2-4, 1987). The Third Summit was, thus, held in Kathmandu, Nepal that reaffirmed convening the Fourth Summit in Sri Lanka in 1988; and the fifth one in Islamabad in 1989. Meanwhile, due to tensions in bilateral relations, both Summits could not be organised on agreed dates and venues.

India-Sri Lanka Tensions

Political and security tensions between New Delhi and Colombo over the Tamil issue[29] and subsequent deployment of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka severely undermined the Summit process from 1988 to 1991. The Tamil insurgency that began in 1982 strained Indo–Lankan ties as India pressurised Sri Lanka for a negotiated settlement of the problem, while Colombo accused New Delhi of backing Tamil rebels. The second Summit provided both countries the opportunity to start negotiations[30] that resulted in an agreement signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India and President Jayawardene of Sri Lanka in 1987.[31] Consequently, New Delhi deployed 80,000 IPKF in Sri Lanka. However,

[28] "Thimphu Likely to Host SAARC Summit," *APFA NEWS.com,* May 18, 2009, http://apfanews.com/stories/thimphu-likely-to-host-saaec-summit.html.

[29] See Rohan Gunaratna, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence* Agencies, 2nd ed. (Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1993). Ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils turned into Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka in 1983 that adversely affected Colombo's relations with New Delhi for several years. The insurgency lasted till 2009 when it was finally crushed by Lankan forces. India's role in Tamil insurgency remained a crucial one.

[30] J. N. Dixit, *India-Pakistan in War & Peace* (London: Routledge, 2002), 253;

[31] Shelton U. Kodikara, "Genesis of the Indo – Sri Lanka Agreement of 29 July, 1987," *Contemporary South Asia* 4, no. 2 (1995): 171-185 (171), http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09584939508719760.

many in Sri Lanka regarded the move as an infringement on the country's sovereignty. Due to the growing resentment and violence over deployment of IPKF, their bilateral relations took a turn for the worse.

Indo–Lankan strained relations affected the Summit process for years and both were responsible for this. Sri Lanka refused to host the Summit until India withdrew its troops. The decision was caused by the internal strife and prevailing resentment and suspicion over deployment of IPKF in the country.[32] Consequently, the Fourth Summit was shifted to Islamabad from December 29–31, 1988, where it was decided to convene the Fifth Summit in Colombo in 1989; and to grant special honour to the Maldives by convening the sixth moot on the eve of its twenty–fifth independence anniversary in 1990. However, Colombo again refused to host the Summit in 1989 as a protest over the presence of IPKF on its soil, therefore, the moot could not take place.

After the withdrawal of Indian troops from Sri Lanka on March 25, 1990, Colombo expressed its readiness to host, but the Maldives insisted on organising it to mark the silver jubilee of its independence. This led to a diplomatic war between both states. However, on persuasion of other members, Colombo ultimately conceded the opportunity to Malé where the Summit was held from November 21–23, 1990.[33] It gave regional leaders an opportunity to express their solidarity with the government and the people of the Maldives on the eve of their national celebrations.[34]

Indo–Lankan controversy also overshadowed the Sixth Summit, scheduled to be held in Colombo from November 7–9, 1991. It was postponed at the last minute when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan announced his inability to attend because of unrest and violence in his country.[35] The SRCs were willing to go ahead with a representative of the King, but India opposed this declaring that it would be a violation of the Charter that outlines the presence of all heads of state or government in order to convene a Summit, as it might 'set an unwelcome precedent and undermine the significance of Summit meetings.'[36] The pause caused by domestic problems of Bhutan continued for several weeks. Reportedly,

[32] Dixit, *India-Pakistan in War & Peace*, 264; Sridharan, "Regional Organisations and Conflict Management," 9.
[33] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 99.
[34] SAARC Secretariat, *SAARC Summits: (1990–1995)*, vol. 2, 56.
[35] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 99–100.
[36] Ibid.

there was an Indian hand behind the crisis which 'engineered' the postponement of the Summit for about a month.[37]

The media and government officials of SRCs believed that India was responsible for ruining the Summit.[38] In fact, the above crisis was also a consequence of the tense Indo–Lankan relations rooted in the deployment of IPKF in Sri Lanka. In 1989, Ranasinghe Premadasa became Sri Lanka's third President and demanded the immediate withdrawal of IPKF. India offered phased withdrawal because of logistical problems, but Colombo rejected this. Sri Lanka had misgivings towards India over alleged Indian efforts to discredit President Premadasa and inspiring an impeachment motion against him through opposition parties in October 1991.[39] Meanwhile, New Delhi was annoyed with President Premadasa over his 'provocative actions' such as demand of immediate withdrawal of IPKF and alleged efforts to undermine India's role in the civil war by inviting leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for direct talks and seeking their support to fight against IPKF, the 'common enemy.'[40] The initial postponement of the Summit was broadly perceived as 'the collapse of the SAARC movement.'[41] However, sagacity prevailed among regional leaders and efforts of SRCs helped save the organisation. On their persuasion, Bhutanese King issued an apology over his failure to attend the Summit which helped remove misapprehensions. Ultimately, the members agreed to convene a one-day Summit which was held in Colombo on December 21, 1991.[42]

Since IPKF was deployed with Sri Lankan consent and as a consequence of a bilateral agreement between the two states, thus, there was no need on the part of Colombo to refuse hosting the Summit on this pretext. It could have used other means to persuade or pressurise India instead of harming the Summit process. Meanwhile, India could have respected and accepted immediately the Lankan demand of withdrawing IPKF instead of harbouring its hegemonic designs in the region. Being the largest member of SAARC, it has the responsibility to protect SAARC.

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[37] "Pak Postpones SAARC Summit Indefinitely," *Economic Times*, December 9, 2002.
[38] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 99–100.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 100.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

Indo–Bangladesh Tensions

The process of postponement of Summits continued in the successive years. Bilateral ties between SAARC members, particularly India's tense relations with Bangladesh and Pakistan affected the Summit process and demonstrated the primacy of politics in South Asian regionalism. The Sixth and Seventh Summits had decided to convene the upcoming moots in Bangladesh and India in 1992 and 1994, respectively. Both these Summits were not held on the agreed dates and were delayed till 1993 and 1995, respectively.

Indo–Bangladesh strained relations and tense regional environment caused delays in the Seventh Summit scheduled in Dhaka in December 1992. Their bilateral relations became worse due to some domestic events in both countries. The Summit was postponed when the Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao refused to attend following the strong reaction in Bangladesh, including demonstrations and eruption of communal violence, over demolition of the historic Babri Mosque at Ayudia, Uttar Pradesh in India by extremist Hindus on December 06, 1992.[43] This was the first occasion when India refused to attend a Summit which gave the SAARC process a severe blow.

The root cause of the problem also existed within Indian domestic politics which was being increasingly polluted due to growing extremism, communal violence and religious outbursts that threatened the lives, property of minorities and their sacred places spreading fear and anger throughout the region, more so in Bangladesh. Communal politics and religious fanaticism in India not only sharpened the cleavages within the polity, but also reinforced divisions at the regional level. After a delay of about five months, the Dhaka Summit was held from April 10–11, 1993.

Pakistan-India Tensions

The Eighth Summit became hostage to poor Indo–Pakistan relations. Reportedly, it was delayed and could not be held in 1994 due to the political and diplomatic 'freeze' between the two countries,[44] primarily

[43] Sridharan, "Regional Organisations and Conflict Management," 9; Ashok Pant, *The Truth of Babri Mosque* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012), 226–227.

[44] Francesco Obino, "SAARC: The Political Challenge for South Asia and Beyond," *Economic & Political Weekly* 44, no. 9, February 28, 2009, http://www.epw.in/journal/2009/09/special-articles/saarc-political-challenge-south-asia-and-beyond.html.

Kashmir-centric issues such as Pakistan's concerns over the grave and massive human rights violations by the occupied forces in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK); Indian accusations and propaganda against Pakistan of sponsoring militancy in IHK, and; Pakistan's insistence and Indian refusal to include the Kashmir problem as a core issue in bilateral talks. The dialogue process which began in December 1990 was suspended in January 1994 till March 1997.[45] Indian unwillingness to accept the reality of the problem and adequately address it through peaceful means led to the 'freeze' in relations with Pakistan which obviously undermined the SAARC Summit.

The above discussion clearly demonstrates the limitations of regional cooperation in the presence of outstanding political problems in South Asia. Nonetheless, the Summit was later held from May 2–4, 1995 albeit under high tensions and suspicion between India and Pakistan.[46]

Second Decade (1996–2005)

The process of postponement of Summits continued throughout the second decade of SAARC. Only five Summits were held in this period and the moots could not be convened in 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2003. The process mainly suffered due to Pakistan-India relations, but internal national issues in host countries also caused delays. For instance, the Ninth Summit was to be held in the Maldives on dates to be decided through consultation. As per Charter provisions, the Summit was due by mid- 1996, but was held in May 1997, i.e. after a delay of one year as the Maldives needed more time to make arrangements. This reinforced the impression that this body was rather 'toothless' since SAARC recurrently found itself unable to hold the Summit annually as provided in the Charter.

The Malé Summit helped improve Pakistan-India ties which in turn regenerated the SAARC process. At the sidelines of the Summit, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met his Indian counterpart I. K. Gujral. Both leaders demonstrated 'considerable warmth' in their relations

[45] Verghese Koithara, *Crafting Peace in Kashmir: Through a Realist Lens* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 43–44.

[46] Mussarat Jabeen, Muhammad Saleem Mazhar and Naheed S. Goraya, "SAARC and Indo–Pak Relationship," *Journal of Political Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 127-145(134), http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/Currentissue-pdf/Musarrat8.pdf.

and agreed to settle all differences though bilateral negotiations in the spirit of Simla Agreement.[47] The improvement in Indo–Pakistan ties had positive impact on SAARC particularly the trade liberalisation process. During the Summit, leaders agreed to bring the deadline of signing SAFTA forward from 2004 to 2001.[48]

At this meeting, it was agreed to hold the Tenth Summit in Colombo, and Eleventh and Twelfth ones in Kathmandu and Islamabad, respectively. Unfortunately, the Tenth Summit was the only one in the 1990s that took place as scheduled, i.e. in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on July 29–31, 1998. Unfortunately, before the Eleventh Summit could be held in Kathmandu, events took a dramatic turn that deteriorated the regional political environment and crippled the process for several years.

India's Underhand Tactics towards Pakistan

Improvement in Pak-India relations was short lived. The thaw in their ties that began in 1997 came to an abrupt end in 1999 following the Kargil conflict and the military coup in Pakistan. The Eleventh Summit was delayed until 2002, putting a gap of 42 months between the Tenth and Eleventh Summits. This was the longest ever gap between any two Summits in 31 years of SAARC history. The Eleventh Summit, to be held in Kathmandu in November 1999, was postponed due to India's arbitrary refusal to attend.[49] Believing that participation in the moot would 'legitimise' the military government in Pakistan, India declined to 'share' the forum with Pervez Musharraf, the leader who had 'masterminded the Kargil operation.'[50]

The military coup was Pakistan's domestic matter which India had no right to use as an excuse to not attend the Summit. Its refusal to attend mainly on this pretext demonstrated that New Delhi does not respect the universally accepted norms of non–interference in the internal affairs of other states – a principle which is part of the Charter of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and SAARC.

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[47] Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia*, 100–101.

[48] IFA, "Malé Declaration," in *Statements and Declarations of SAARC: Summits of the Heads of State or Government (1985-2010)* (Kathmandu: Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2010), https://ifa.org.np/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/SAARC.pdf.

[49] Ross Masood Hussain, "New Directions for SAARC: A View from Pakistan," *South Asian Survey* 10, no. 1 (2003): 57-69 (64–65).

[50] Sridharan, "Regional Organisations and Conflict Management," 8.

The SAARC pause continued for about 26 months and the Kathmandu Summit was finally held from January 4–6, 2002. This Summit accepted Pakistan's offer to host the twelfth meeting in early 2003. However, in December 2002, Pakistan announced postponement of the scheduled event after India once again refused to confirm participation. Islamabad accused Delhi of 'sabotaging the event and adopting devious methods to derail' the Summit.

Pakistan wanted to host the Summit in April 2013. However, it brought the dates forward to January after New Delhi informed that Prime Minister Vajpayee would be preoccupied with the national budget and could not attend in April. When Islamabad requested SAARC members to confirm their participation in January, India did not respond.[51] Reportedly, Pakistan had advanced the dates from April to January on the proposal of Indian Minister of External Affairs during the twenty-third session of CoM, held at Kathmandu on August 21–22, 2002. When Pakistan sought formal confirmation, India objected to the SAARC Secretariat claiming that the Summit was originally scheduled for April 2003. After Pakistan announced postponement, India accused Islamabad of 'sabotaging' the event.[52]

This was the fourth time when New Delhi engineered Summit postponement which shows its lack of commitment towards this Association. More significantly, it also demonstrates how India manipulated things to have the meeting postponed and then used it to malign Pakistan. Such tactics recurrently bedeviled the regional political environment, undermined the Association and crippled South Asian regionalism. Finally, after a year's delay, the Islamabad Summit was held from January 4–6, 2004.

India using Intra-state Issues as Excuses

As soon as the Summit started gathering momentum after some improvement in Pakistan-India relations, other intra-state issues began to irk India during the preparations of the SAARC Summit in 2005,[53] which

[51] "Pak Postpones SAARC Summit Indefinitely," *Economic Times*; "Sri Lanka to Push for SAARC Summit," *Sunday Times*, December 15, 2002.
[52] "Pakistan, India Trade Jibes as SAARC Summit Postponed," *Daily Times*, December 10, 2002.
[53] Sridharan, "Regional Organisations and Conflict Management," 9.

had to be postponed twice. Initially, it was scheduled for January 9–11, 2005 to mark the twentieth anniversary of SAARC but was delayed due to the devastating tsunami that hit the region on December 26, 2004.[54]

The Summit, re-scheduled for February 6–7, 2005, was postponed once again after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh refused to attend, apparently because of political developments in Nepal, particularly after the Nepalese King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency after sacking the government and assuming direct powers on February 1, 2005. India officially announced that it would not attend the Summit because of prevailing political conditions and security concerns in its 'neighbourhood.' New Delhi made this announcement when the pre-Summit meeting of the SAARC programme committee was in progress and foreign secretaries of respective countries had reached Dhaka for the SAARC Standing Committee meeting. This was the fifth time in the then 20 year-SAARC history that New Delhi caused delay in the Summit.[55]

There were also rumours that India had decided not to attend the moot due to the internal political situation of Bangladesh, particularly because of some hard measures that the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government had taken against leadership of the main opposition party, the Awami League.[56] India, while rejecting the rumours,[57] claimed that it took the decision due to two reasons: declaration of the state of emergency by Nepalese King and the security situation in Bangladesh.[58] Earlier, a bomb had exploded in a rally of Awami League before the scheduled Summit.[59]

India's move angered Bangladesh which claimed that New Delhi had announced this without any prior consultation or intimation. Dhaka alleged that India had 'singled out Bangladesh as a culprit.'[60] For Dhaka, the logic of deferral of the Summit on security grounds was neither understandable nor acceptable as the previous two Summits had been

[54] "13th SAARC Summit Postponed: Pakistan Disappointed, Calls for New Dates," *Dawn*, February 3, 2005, https://www.dawn.com/news/382005/13th-saarc-summit-postponed-pakistan-disappointed-calls-for-new-dates.
[55] Ibid.; Robert L. Hardgrave Jr. and Stanley A. Kochanek, *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*, 7th ed. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 502.
[56] Nirupama Subramanian, "Why India Stopped 2005 Dhaka SAARC Summit," *Hindu*, March 29, 2011, http://www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/why-india-stopped-2005-dhaka-saarc-summit/article1579428.ece.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

successfully convened despite Maoist insurgency and bomb blasts in Nepal (2002) and Pakistan (2004), respectively.[61] After a delay of about nine months, the Dhaka Summit was finally held on November 12–13, 2005.

Once again, India used domestic matters of SRCs as a pretext to not attend a moot, reinforcing the impression that the latter does not believe in the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. It sought to use the Summits, by declining to attend them, as a leverage to mend the behaviour and policies including the domestic ones of SRCs. It kept on bullying its smaller neighbours on one pretext or another, albeit at the cost of regional progress.

India's Conditionalities

India occasionally strived to link some of its demands as preconditions for its willingness to participate in Summits in neighbouring countries. It sought to change their 'behaviour' before intimating its willingness to take part. Two such incidents are worth citing: first, it insisted on progress on trade liberalisation in South Asia before confirming its participation in the Twelfth Summit in 2003; second, it strived to change Dhaka's policies as a precondition for its participation in the Thirteenth Summit in 2005.

- Using Trade Liberalisation as Leverage

New Delhi refused to participate in Twelfth Summit until Pakistan agreed on substantial progress on trade liberalisation. Apparently, the Summit was cancelled due to differences on the timetable of the moot. However, the real causes of the delay were quite different. New Delhi did not confirm its participation in the Summit because India believed Pakistan had halted 'substantive progress' in trade related issues. Without progress on trade issues, India considered participation in the Summit futile. This very fact was confirmed by official Indian sources. When reporters asked why India had not confirmed its participation, Navtej S. Sarna, the spokesperson for Indian Ministry of External Affairs, responded:

[61] "26366: Bangladesh Angry Reaction to SAARC Postponement," *Hindu,* March 29, 2011, http://www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/the-cables/26366-bangladesh-angry-reaction-to-saarc-postponement/article1579759.ece?ref=relatedNews.

> It is not an issue of dates but is an issue of making meaningful progress and that was lacking ... due to Pakistan's obduracy.

He claimed that:

> ..[a] strange situation had been reached when every meaningful proposal for economic cooperation was being systematically sabotaged by Pakistan.

He suggested that either cooperation on trade or postponement of the Summit were the choices available to Pakistan. Thus, he added, 'Pakistan has announced the postponement of the Summit, then it is a choice that they have made.'[62] Later, the Summit was organised in Islamabad in January 2014, during which Pakistan, besides other SRCs, agreed on significant progress on trade and thus, paved the way for signing SAFTA.

However, this set a bad precedent. Apparently, India's successful coercion of Pakistan and forcing it to allow concessions on trade liberalisation encouraged the former to use the same tactics against Bangladesh before the next Summit.

- Riling the Bangladesh Regime

In February 2005, India refused to attend Thirteenth Summit scheduled in Dhaka in order to pressurise Bangladesh. Initially, India announced that it could not attend the Summit due to the prevailing security situation and political conditions in its neighbourhood, i.e. Bangladesh and Nepal, respectively.

However, India intentionally caused delay of the Summit as New Delhi wanted Dhaka to 'pay attention' to its security and political concerns. As an Indian official remarked, it was not just an issue of blasts,[63] but was a consequence of the 'real build-up in unfriendly attitude' towards New Delhi. The decision to cause last minute postponement of the Summit 'was intended to send a message.' In the words of an Indian official, 'in light of increasing intolerance in Bangladesh' and 'sustained anti-India sentiment' there, 'India needed to bring pressure to bear on Dhaka.'[64]

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[62] "Pak Postpones SAARC Summit Indefinitely," *Economic Times*.
[63] Subramanian, "Why India Stopped 2005 Dhaka SAARC Summit."
[64] Ibid.

New Delhi believed that there were certain 'Bangladeshi offences' which worked against the 'SAARC spirit.' Therefore, India wanted officials in Dhaka to 'realise the danger to themselves from leaving certain issues unchecked.'[65] These alleged offences included the anti-India statements made by senior politicians and some 'sitting ministers' in Dhaka; unchecked activities of alleged 'Pakistani backed Islamic groups' with the potential to have 'an effect on Indian security'; presence of some ministers from Jamaat-i-Islami in the Cabinet, particularly the industries' minister who watched over an important industrial project then expected to be launched by Tata Group of India;[66] 'sustained anti-India sentiment' and growing 'intolerance' in Bangladesh; and most importantly, a speech made by a serving general with 'clearance' of Bangladeshi Prime Minister, which stated that Dhaka needed to 'build alliances to counter the enemy – India.'[67]

Third Decade (2006–2015)

The third decade of SAARC also continued to witness long delays and cancellations as well. Domestic problems such as political instability, violence, and economic crises besides tensions in bilateral relations of SACs affected the process. Only five Summits were held during this period and the moot could not take place in 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013 and 2015.

Members' Domestic Problems

The organisation of the Summit suffered due to internal weaknesses and domestic problems of SACs in the third decade. No summit was scheduled in 2006. Rather, the Association decided to convene the Fourteenth Summit in India in the 'first quarter' of 2007 which New Delhi organised in April 2007. This was the only Summit that was held as scheduled.

The Fifteenth Summit was to be held in the Maldives which later expressed its inability to organise due to its upcoming General Elections

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] "30697: DAS Gastright Encourages Coordination on Bangladesh," *Hindu*, March 29, 2011, http://www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/the-cables/30697-das-gastright-encourages-coordination-on-bangladesh/article1579764.ece?ref=relatedNews.

in 2008. Sri Lanka volunteered to host the event that coincided with its sixtieth independence anniversary.[68] Initially, Sri Lanka wanted to convene the Summit in Kandy, an ancient hillside in the country. But it had to shift the venue to Colombo due to security reasons and lack of infrastructure in Kandy.[69]

The Colombo Summit, held on August 2–3, 2008, agreed to convene the next moot in the Maldives in September 2009 which the Maldives again declined - this time, due to the ongoing economic recession and tourist season in the country.[70] On Bhutanese request, venue of the Summit was shifted to Thimphu where it was held from April 28–29, 2010, commemorating the SAARC Silver Jubilee celebrations.[71] The moot agreed to hold the Seventeenth Summit in the Maldives which finally hosted it in Addu City from November 10–11, 2011.

The Eighteenth Summit was held after a delay of about two years. The Summit was to be held in Nepal, as per Charter provisions, by the end of 2012 but it could not take place until November 2014. Nepal initially proposed to host it in early 2013, but then suggested a new date, i.e. September 2013, due to its unstable domestic political situation.[72] In fact, the event was delayed chiefly due to recurrent deferment of the Inter-

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[68] "SAARC Summit Likely to be Deferred," *Daily Star*, March 24, 2009, http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=81132.

[69] "The Maldives to Host 16th SAARC Summit," *People's Daily Online,* August 4, 2008, http://en.people.cn/90001/90777/90851/6465528.html; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka "Sri Lanka to Host the 15th SAARC Summit" (Government of Sri Lanka, 2007), http://www.mea.gov.lk/index.php/media/news-archive/1083-sri-lanka-to-host-the-15th-saarc-summit.

[70] "SAARC Summit Likely to be Deferred," *Daily Star*.

[71] "Bhutan Wants to Host SAARC Summit after Maldives Backs out," *Deccan Herald*, May 21, 2009, http://www.deccanherald.com/content/3707/bhutan-wants-host-saarc-summit.html.

[72] For details see, Carter Centre, *Political Transition Monitoring in Nepal, 2009 – 2014: Final Report* (Atlanta: Carter Centre, n.d.), 5. https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/nepal-2014-final.pdf. By early 2012, Nepal witnessed protests, demonstrations and prolonged strikes by various political and ethnic groups for or against different issues and proposals, particularly those related to 'identity – based federalism,' to be included in the country's news constitution, As the five year term of the constituent assembly ended, without framing the constitution, in early 2013 the country was gripped by a constitutional crises until fresh elections were held in November 2013. From mid–2012 to early 2013, country also suffered 'nine months of political deadlock' over composition of an 'interim election council' led by a 'non–political' Prime Minister, to administer the elections.

Summit Session (ISS) which had to be held prior to May 2012.[73] Malé had to cancel ISS several times due to internal political conditions in Maldives and Nepal. Kathmandu was unable to attend the ISS in February 2013. Maldives also put off the ISS twice since it 'inconvenienced' India to attend in November 2012 and June 2013. Due to these reasons, the Kathmandu Summit could not take place in 2013 and, after delay of about two years, it was finally held from November 26–27, 2014.[74]

Venue of SAARC Secretariat

Apart from domestic problems such as political instability, disorder and election related activities in SRCs, the fact that the SAARC Secretariat is in Nepal can also be a reason, albeit minor reason of Summit delays and postponements. Nepal has been hit by insurgency and political instability for the last two decades compounded with natural calamities and occasional tense relations with India. These factors in combination can also affect smooth functioning of the Association.

Amendment in the SAARC Charter

The Summit did not take place in 2015 because of an amendment in the SAARC Charter made in the Eighteenth Summit held in Kathmandu in 2014. The amendment calls for convening the Summits 'every two years or earlier, if necessary.' It also provides that CoMs should meet 'once a year, the Standing Committee at least once a year, and the Programming Committee at least twice a year.' It was also decided to convert the Programming Committee into the SAARC Charter body.[75] At the Kathmandu Summit (2014) it was decided to convene the next moot in Pakistan in 2016.

[73] "SAARC Inter-Summit Postponed Once Again," *Himalayan Times,* February 22, 2013.
[74] "Nepal Unlikely to Host 18th SAARC Summit within 2013," *Kathmandu Post,* April 11, 2013.
[75] SAARC Secretariat, "Eighteenth SAARC Summit: Kathmandu Declaration" (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 26-27 November 2014), http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Summit%20Declarations/Kathmandu-18thSummit26-27Nov2013.pdf.

Fourth Decade (2016-onwards)

SAARC has entered the fourth decade of its existence, but it is still not strong enough to prevent its members from sabotaging this highest South Asian forum. The nature of ties among its members and a regional political environment of distrust continues to haunt the SAARC process. Now, it faces even graver challenges, including the one to its own relevance and survival.

An Age-old Rivalry Rears its Head

As soon as SAARC entered its fourth decade of existence, Pakistan-India antagonism caused arbitrary cancellation of the Nineteenth Summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad from November 9–10, 2016 in the wake of clashes on the Line of Control (LoC) after a fresh wave of mass protests by the Kashmiris[76] and a militant attack on an army camp in Uri in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK).[77] Necessary arrangements by Islamabad to organise the event were complete when India in its bid to 'isolate' Pakistan refused to take part in the event.

India not only used the attack that killed 18 soldiers and left many others wounded in Uri, as a pretext to refuse participation in the Summit, but also maligned Pakistan and held it responsible for the incident without any concrete evidence and without completing a proper investigation.[78] India's Prime Minister Modi announced that 'the attack will not go unavenged (sic).'

[76] See Mirza Waheed, "India's Crackdown in Kashmir: Is This the World's First Mass Blinding?" *Guardian*, November 8, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/08/india-crackdown-in-kashmir-is-this-worlds-first-mass-blinding. In July 2016, Indian security forces killed Burhan Wani, a young and popular militant leader that sparked widespread protests and revived the freedom movement in IHK. Indian forces used brute force to crush the protestors killing scores of innocent people and leaving hundreds injured. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, while addressing the United Nations General Assembly's annual session in September, raised the issue of Indian oppression that infuriated New Delhi. Meanwhile, a militant attack on Indian military camp in Ori sector in IHK also led to escalation on LoC and working boundary between the two states. These incidents took bilateral relations of the two states at the lowest ebb..

[77] Ibid.

[78] Kamran Yousaf, "New Delhi Torpedoes 19th SAARC Summit," *Express Tribune*, September 28, 2016, http://tribune.com.pk/story/1189923/frantic-move-new-delhi-torpedoes-19th-saarc-summit/.

New Delhi considered various options to 'retaliate' and 'penalise' Pakistan, such as the use of force including overt or covert operations; abrogation of the Indus Water Treaty; economic coercion through downgrading trade ties and revoking the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status that it had granted to Pakistan in 1996; and 'globally isolating' Islamabad. Acting on the latter, it pressurised other SAARC members Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan to opt out of the scheduled Summit.[79]

These countries toed New Delhi's line as indicated in the letters sent by them to the former SAARC Chairman in Nepal, which echoed the same wording and phrases as that of India.[80] Besides, India also pressurised Nepal and Sri Lanka to boycott the meeting, and hence, both countries issued statements indicating their inability to attend on the pretext that the regional 'environment was not conducive' to hold it.[81]

A close study of the letters sent to the SAARC Chairman[82] suggest that they were written/drafted at one place and subsequently amended/slightly changed in other countries. They stated that due to 'increased level of violence and …imposed terrorism' (Afghanistan), 'growing interference' in their state by 'one country' (Bangladesh), 'increasing cross-border terrorist attacks … and growing interference in

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[79] Shuchi Shukla, ed., "PM Modi Won't Go to Pak, 3 Other Nations Join India in Boycott: 10 Facts," *NDTV*, September 29, 2016, http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-says-no-to-pak-trip-3-other-nations-join-saarc-boycott-10-facts-1467446; Shubhajit Roy, "To Isolate Pakistan in Neighbourhood, India Pulls out of Islamabad SAARC Summit," *Indian Express*, September 28, 2016, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/to-isolate-pakistan-in-neighbourhood-india-pulls-out-of-islamabad-saarc-summit-3053697/.

[80] See excerpts of the letters in "SAARC Summit: Now, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan Say They Won't be Going to Islamabad," *Indian Express,* September 28, 2016, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/after-india-now-bangladesh-pulls-out-of-saarc-summit-in-islamabad/; "SAARC Meet Could be Postponed, Hints Pak after 3 More Countries Pull out," *Tribune,* September 28, 2016, http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/saarc-meet-could-be-postponed-hints-pak-after-3-more-countries-pull-out/301982.html.

[81] Shubhajit Roy and Yubaraj Ghimire, "Summit Off: Nepal too on Board, Delhi Dialled SAARC Hotlines," *Indian Express,* October 19, 2016, http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/environment-not-conducive-to-host-saarc-summit-nepal-3061477/; Baqir Sajjad Syed, "SAARC Summit Put off Indefinitely," *Dawn,* October 1, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1287281/saarc-summit-put-off-indefinitely.

[82] Excerpts of the letters have been published in various newspapers.

the internal affairs of member states by one country' (India) and 'recent escalation of terrorism in the region' (Bhutan) has 'created the environment' (Bangladesh and India) or 'seriously compromised' it (Bhutan), 'which/that is not conducive to the successful hosting/holding of the 19th SAARC Summit in Islamabad' (Bangladesh/India).

Pakistan dismissed all these accusations and deplored the Indian move to disrupt the Summit process.[83] This was the sixth occasion that India intentionally compromised a scheduled Summit, mainly due to its quest to gain some political mileage in global and domestic politics. India 'orchestrated' the attack for multiple reasons, such as to divert domestic and international attention away from the ongoing indigenous mass movement and Indian atrocities in IHK; to thwart Pakistani efforts to highlight these matters as well as Kashmir problem at the UN, and to boost Prime Minister Modi's image as a hardliner in order to attract support of extremist elements before the state elections in Indian Punjab and Uttar Pradesh in March 2017.

This reinforced the impression that the regional political environment will continue to overshadow the SAARC process which cannot move forward without adequately resolving the outstanding political problems in South Asia.

Cancellation of Summits and Impact on Regionalism

Had SAARC Summits been held regularly without any delay or postponement, they would have provided SAARC leaders more opportunities to discuss regional issues and sort out different problems that afflict the regional political environment. SAARC Summits provide regional leaders the opportunities to improve mutual understanding, build personal rapport, create goodwill and strengthen bonds among themselves and their countries to help foster friendly atmosphere conducive for regional cooperation. Frequent cancellations created ill-will and misunderstandings among SAARC members and contributed to further deterioration of their bilateral relations.

Second, strained bilateral relations of SACs, due to arbitrary postponement by members prevented SAARC countries from making

[83] "Pakistan Announces Postponement of 19th SAARC Summit," *Express Tribune*, September 30, 2016, http://tribune.com.pk/story/1191432/pakistan-announces-postponement-19th-saarc-summit/.

concessions and reaching agreements on issues and matters important for the growth of regional cooperation. Only friendly ties among partners in a regional grouping can induce them to a give and take which SAARC members lacked on several occasions due to the aforesaid reasons.

Third, postponement delayed the process of reaching important milestones. For instance, in the Ninth Summit held in Maldives in 1997, SACs agreed to bring the deadline of signing SAFTA forward to 2001. However, India's refusal to participate in the Eleventh Summit scheduled to be held in Nepal in 1999 delayed its signing for about three years.

Fourth, frequent postponement shows inherent weakness with the SAARC polity, and has led to a bad name for the organisation itself and this 'cancellation/postponement phenomenon' is cited as one of the evidences of SAARC failures.

Conclusion

SAARC Summits were frequently postponed due to numerous reasons but mainly because of the prevailing political disputes and hostile relations between SACS. The strenuous relations between India and Sri Lanka (1988–91), India–Bangladesh tensions (1992 and 2005) and India–Pakistan rivalry (1994–1996, 1999–2003 and 2016) have adversely affected the process of South Asian regionalism. Unresolved bilateral issues, political disputes and domestic problems of members also affected the Summits. Often, it was India who gave a 'severe blow' to the process by causing arbitrary postponement. At least six Summits were postponed because India refused to attend them on one pretext or another. Besides, once it used Bhutan to 'engineer' deferment in 1991.

Member states have also not taken serious interest and have lacked the will to host Summits regularly. In the first decade (1986–1995), seven Summits were held, while five moots were held each in the second (1996–2005) and third (2006–2015) decades. This shows members' decreasing interest in the Summit process which is substantiated by the fact that they amended the SAARC Charter that now provides that the Summit should be convened once every two years.

Often SACs prioritised internal considerations such as national budget preparations, tourist seasons, election activities etc., over holding of Summits which also shows lack of sincerity and commitment to the process of South Asian regionalism. Their domestic problems, such as

political crises, unrest, instability, violence and insurgencies also affected the process.

The inability of some SRCs to organise the event suggests that convening it on time as stipulated in the Charter depends on several factors, such as: sound economy, political stability, good law and order and security situation in the host country, besides strong bilateral relations among SAARC members, and willingness on the part of all regional states to participate.

SAARC leaders must reiterate their resolve to provide much needed support and to serve as backbone of the organisation. To this end, they need to overcome political differences and take practical steps by working together for the collective benefit of their people. Keeping in view the potential utility of Summits for improving the regional political environment, it is recommended that:

- SAARC should revert back to its previous provision of holding Summits on an annual basis.
- SAARC must adopt a fixed schedule and venue for its Summits, on the pattern of the annual session of UN General Assembly. To this end, two or three days of any month of the year can be fixed.
- Besides, Summits must take place at a permanent venue, such as the SAARC Secretariat. This can help protect the process from being affected by members' inability to organise the event due to financial constraints, lack of adequate infrastructure, economic difficulties and political unrest, besides tensions between SACs. However, the current location of the SAARC Secretariat at Kathmandu can still pose problems given the recurrent political unrest in Nepal, besides its occasionally tense ties with India. SAARC should, thus, consider shifting the SAARC Secretariat to a relatively more peaceful, politically stable and economically prosperous country. Sri Lanka seems to be the most appropriate place for its location because it has a mature and stable democratic system and sound economy. Besides, it also enjoys good relations with all SACs, including India.

- Instead of putting bilateral, contentious issues under the carpet, SAARC members must address them head on. To this end, they must amend the Charter and provide a Conflict Resolution Mechanism to tackle issues that plague their bilateral relations, deteriorate the regional political environment and undermine cooperation in South Asia.■