

# Regional cooperation – a view from Bangladesh



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Even a cursory glance at the current developments shows, South Asia is at the crossroads. With Pakistan caught in the throes of political instability and contested entanglements in Afghanistan - which once again is faced with the bleak possibility of civil war-, Sri Lanka in a state of sullen peace after the military defeat of the LTTE, Maldives in a state of confusion after the ousting of then President Mohamed Nasheed in a 'coup-like scenario', Nepal deeply trapped in a constitutional crisis, Bhutan trying to find its own way towards 'National Happiness', and India increasingly looking beyond the region, South Asia has made little progress towards cohesive, purposeful action directed towards regional cooperation.

However, it seems that things are changing - at least so it seems: Voices from within the region are increasingly advocating the break with past trajectories in order to achieve security, welfare as well as to solve the several, multi-layered identity crisis of South Asian states. But what could the driving factor(s) for regional cooperation be? Having the success stories of the EU as well as other regional entities in mind, it is obvious that in most cases of area related cooperation and integration, these were all exclusive processes which were initiated and supported by elites. However, one must state that the elites cleared the way for opportunities and (challenges) of regional cooperation only after exposure to extra-ordinary criti-

cal junctures in their respective regions, e.g. the experiences of the Second World War in Europe, South Asia has not reached this level yet. The departure of colonial rule from the Indian subcontinent and the subsequent collateral traumatic events of two partitions (British India into India and Pakistan in 1947 and the break-up of East from West Pakistan leading to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971) did not only lead to enduring conflicts and mistrust but also created a political unwillingness and ignorance among some South Asian governments regarding collective regional efforts. Therefore, it seems that the European top-down approach does not work in the South Asian context, definitely not as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. In this context, one has to look for alternative engines to enhance closer regional cooperation. With around 1.5 billion people, the South Asian subcontinent is the greatest regional entity on the global landscape.

But more importantly, South Asia is characterised by outstanding vibrant civil societies. There are numerous examples of how political awareness and participative citizens were able to create large-scale movements in order to pressure governments to transform the people's interests and demands into political decision-making processes or even enforce whole regime changes. The lawyer's movement in Pakistan, Nepal's Jana Andolan I & II, Maldivians persistent struggle to end authoritarianism at the atolls, Bangladesh's

movement for re-establishing parliamentary democracy, or recent anti-corruption activities in India can be seen as some remarkable examples. Therefore, one must realise that civil societies within South Asian constitute a significant resource, a push as well as a pull factor for regionalisation.

There is no doubt, that Bangladesh and its people played a crucial role in this process from the beginning. Being founded in 1985 in Dhaka, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the principal mechanism for regional cooperation, was primarily a Bangladeshi initiative.

However, besides the humble performance of SAARC, the enthusiastic approach towards regional cooperation of Bangladeshis seems to be resilient. A phenomenon which was recently confirmed by the 'Insights South Asia' report on Bangladesh, a survey by the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), a Brussels based think tank, compiled in partnership with the renowned public opinion research institute Gallup. One of the main related findings of this report is that around half of all Bangladeshis were familiar with SAARC" (44 per cent), and "a majority of those who were familiar with SAARC supported it" (99.8 per cent).

Furthermore, "a large majority of those who had heard of SAARC agreed that closer regional ties between the countries of South Asia would bring important benefits". What is especially promising is the fact, that

the Bangladeshi youth has a positive attitude towards its South Asian neighbours, particularly India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The support of the youth is a must for envisioning a cooperative South Asian future. This positive attitude is also reflected in their overwhelming supportive view on SAARC, albeit being aware of the

appraised India's positive role and 84 per cent of them have friends and relatives in India which can basically be identified as indicators for harmonious India-Bangladesh ties. Here, the survey attempts to evaluate the ambiguous nature of bilateral relations between Dhaka and New Delhi. As the reports states, 55 per cent of the Bangladeshi peo-

and Trade' is a prime example for sentiments of unfair treatment which are common among the general public in Bangladesh. Of course, Indians share some similar thoughts; however, the flashpoint of migration is of paramount importance and a huge concern for New Delhi. Being more or less neglected on the Bangladeshi side, at least according to Indian accusations, migration is a highly sensitive and emotional theme. As the name of the survey series promises, it offers interesting insights, which could alter the course of the whole discussion. As the compiled data states, the majority of the Bangladeshi people have no concrete intentions to migrate, especially not to India, neither permanently nor temporarily. This is due to the fact that people in Bangladesh identify the benefits of regionalisation primarily as "job creation in Bangladesh", "better opportunities to export products" as well as "cheaper imports", and that "young Bangladeshis were fairly optimistic about their personal economic future".

Subsequently if Bangladeshis decide to move, despite the close connection in terms of greater socio-cultural and economic similarities, India ranks only third on the list of desired destinations. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and United States are mentioned as the most desirable destinations for migration in spite of distance and/or cultural differences. However, there is no doubt that migration will remain a significant theme in the bilateral rela-

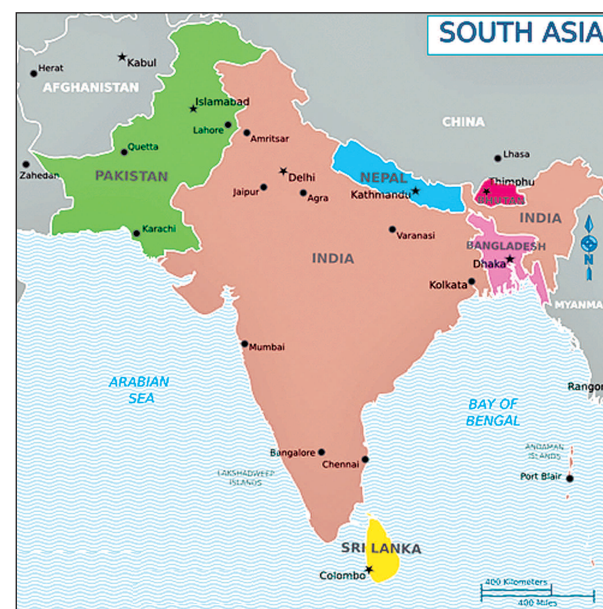
tions between India and Bangladesh. But political decision-makers in India must realise that they have to take migration out of the equation as a potential threat towards regionalisation. Instead, New Delhi should focus on the issue of water sharing which since decades is a pressuring theme, existential for both countries. The ongoing controversies about the sharing of Ganges water, which finds its expression in the debates over the Farakka river management project, can be seen as indication for the high momentum of this issue.

Even though the future cannot be predicted precisely one can predict in which direction Bangladesh could move.

As the reports emphasise, it is clear that "Bangladeshis believe their country has a positive role to play in building a stronger South Asia region". The relationship with India is all 'smooth and easy'. Re-building a normalised relationship with Islamabad again Dhaka could take a crucial role "in promoting dialogue and turning good intentions across the region into actions".

Finally, as the report shows, Bangladesh's active, vibrant and political civil society will push regionalisation in South Asia, a phenomenon which will also be hopefully witnessed beyond the Brahmaputra.

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limitations of this organisation 95% of the young people who were familiar with SAARC "thought it was a good thing".

It is interesting to point out that only Pakistan and Afghanistan were portrayed in a negative manner by virtually all age groups. India, however, was ranked second amongst the SAARC states that pose a great security threat to the region. Only at first sight this seems contradictory to other findings of the report, e.g. 78 per cent of the Bangladeshi's

ple see historic animosities as major obstacles in establishing a more intensive regional cooperation. In the light of the geographical circumstances, this is a finding which seems even more pressing when it comes to issues such as bilateral water transport, water sharing or migration which have been troubled fields of bilateral cooperation between both states since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. The renewed India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Transit