

## SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION: A PROFILE

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka was formed in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1985. The seven leaders adopted the "Dhaka Declaration" on the principles of regional co-operation and signed a charter setting out the framework of the SAARC. SAARC's objectives were to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development, to strengthen collective self-reliance, and to increase regional trust and co-operation.

Summits among Heads of State and Government have been held annually-1986 in Bangalore, India, 1987 in Kathmandu, Nepal, and 1988 in Islamabad, Pakistan. The 1989 meeting scheduled to be held in Sri Lanka was not held. The Summit's chairman is the leader of the host country. The Council of Ministers meets semi-annually while Standing Committees meet when the occasion arises. Eleven areas identified for possible cooperation are presently being handled by Technical Committees.

### POLITICAL COOPERATION

Designed to build consensus for regional issues, bilateral issues are outside of SAARC's framework. One example of the regional issues can be seen in the "Bangalore Declaration" of 1986 which condemned as "criminal" all acts, methods and practices of terrorism. SAARC 2000, a regional plan for a basic needs program of the 1.3 billion people expected by the year 2000, is a further example.

SAARC's format of institutionalized discussion however have been an opportunity to promote the relationship between India and Pakistan. The 1988 summit produced three new agreements between India and Pakistan, the first since the Simla Pact of 1972; one involved a mutual ban on attacks on nuclear installations.

### ECONOMIC COOPERATION

At present the structure of SAARC has not extended to economic cooperation. It is expected that this will increasingly change. Historically, trade was almost wholly regional, however upon independence the countries focused outward. Currently under 3% of the regions trade is with neighbouring countries. Difficulties may arise as it is felt that regional trade can be promoted principally by concessions from India.

### ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The 1987 summit established a permanent SAARC secretariat in Katmandu. Secretary General Abul Ahsan is a Bangladesh national and former career diplomat.

Unanimous approval is required for the admittance of new members. A proposal by India to admit Afghanistan into SAARC in 1987 was unsuccessful due to opposition to the Soviet supported government in Kabul. Myanmar and Mauritius have been identified as possible applicants, although neither has applied. As yet there are no linkages with other regional organizations like ASEAN or the EEC, nor observer status for individual countries.