

**BANGLADESH**

**AND**

**SAARC**

**ISSUES, PERSPECTIVES AND OUTLOOK**

Edited by  
Iftekharuzzaman & Imtiaz Ahmed

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**Issues, Perspectives and Outlook**

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**Iftekharuzzaman  
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## Editors' Note

SAARC has come a long way since the first Summit of the South Asian Heads of State or Government in Dhaka in December 1985. In less than a decade of its operation, it has already established a well-developed institutional network, and it is already credited with the task of organizing more than a dozen Commissions, stretching its activities from poverty alleviation to the control of population, from anti-drug measures to the control of pollution. Such a profusion of co-operative activities among the South Asian states in such a short time, indeed, deserves credit, particularly when the post-colonial history of South Asia has been wrought with so much hatred and conflict among the member states. This year, in December, Bangladesh will host the Seventh Summit of the South Asian Heads of State, which will also mark the return of the Chairmanship of the SAARC to Dhaka, the birth place of the Association. Keeping the latter event in mind, the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies and the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, jointly organized a two-day National Seminar on "Bangladesh and SAARC: Issues, Perspectives and Outlook" on 23-24 August 1992, involving members of academic institutions, professionals, and policy-makers of the country. The idea was to take account of what has already been achieved, what are the short-term and long-term hindrances to cooperation, and what promises does SAARC hold for the future.

The response of the varied shades of participants was immense and profoundly encouraging, as will be evident in the papers collected in this book. It may be mentioned here that the papers were presented thematically under several headings, within the broad framework of the subject-matter of the Seminar. The first paper, *The Thing Called SAARC: Beyond Modernist Perspective*, which incidentally was the Key-note



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paper, stressed the need for viewing the SAARC process beyond the categories of modernity and the organization of modern nation-state. The paper contended that the success of the SAARC would remain limited if nurtured merely at the governmental or state levels since the organization and reproduction of the latter not always run fully in conformity with content and spirit of the SAARC process.

The second and third papers were presented in Women, Environment and SAARC session. Farah Kabir and Farzana Hossain, in their paper, "Gender Issues and Democratic Order in South Asia: A Bangladesh Perspective", highlighted the dismal condition of women in South Asia in general and that of Bangladesh in particular. They stated that if democratization in South Asia was to succeed, which was also a precondition for the success of the SAARC, women must be made "free" from the structures of physical and mental domination. Nahid Islam, on the other hand, in her paper, "Ethnicity and Environment in South Asia," focussed on the relationship between environmental degradation and ethnic disturbance in the region, suggesting thereby that unless care was given to the proper development of the environment and the issue of ethnicity, not only would they lead to violence within and among states but also hamper the development of regional cooperation.

The fourth and fifth papers were presented in Economic Issues and SAARC session. Atiur Rahman, in his paper, "The Quest for Development in South Asia: Probable Creative Options", critiqued the current developmental approaches undertaken by the countries of this region. He opined that the quest for development in South Asia must include both regional economic cooperation and national self-reliance. A. K. H. Morshed, in his paper, "Implications of Dal-bhat for Regional Security in South Asia", further broadened the notion of development by including the political side of the matter, particularly the need for addressing the problematic of human right to freedom from hunger and undernourishment in South Asia. In this context, Morshed stressed the need for a regional approach of standard-setting in the field of nutrition and the enunciation of a Right to Food as well as developing creatively the present SAARC Food Security Reserve. These measures, he felt, will protect vulnerable groups, reduce costs and help the



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overall development of the region.

Six papers were presented in the session under the heading, Inter-state Relations, Security and SAARC. M. Shahiduzzaman, in his paper, "Alliance Reliability in the Post-Cold War Context and Bangladesh Military Strategy", viewed the problem of insecurity facing the countries of South Asia, particularly Bangladesh, from a realist approach. In the backdrop of the demise of the Cold War, Shahiduzzaman suggested the need for reevaluating traditional strategic imperatives in this region. In this context, he pleaded for an Indo-Bangladesh military-strategic integration based on historical and racial unity to safeguard Bangladesh's as well as region's interests. The sixth paper by A. K. M. Abdus Sabur titled, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Retrospect and Prospects", looked at the development dialectics of the problems shaping Bangladesh-India relations. Sabur argued that unless India shunned its hegemonic aspirations in the region and Bangladesh redirected its diplomatic maneuverings with India, no meaningful development would take place in the field of inter-state cooperation. Ashraful Hasan and Ziaush Shams, in their paper, "Reappraising Foreign Policy Directions: Bangladesh Looks Towards Southeast Asia", brought a different dimension to the understanding of regional cooperation, particularly the role of Bangladesh in such a venture, by highlighting the possibilities of SAARC-ASEAN relationship. The eighth paper by A. T. Salahuddin Ahmed titled, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: An Evaluation", further explored the problematic of inter-state relationship, which, he felt, needed to be corrected through the proper construction of a new framework of understanding and cooperation. Both bilateral and SAARC initiatives could well contribute to the process. Both Akmal Hossain and Md. Nuruzzaman in their papers, "Recent Global changes and New Imperatives for SAARC" and "Global Change and Regional Cooperation in South Asia" respectively, highlighted the impact of global change on regional cooperation. Akmal Hossain opined that recent global changes created opportunities for regional cooperation in core political and economic matters, while Nuruzzaman argued that the global change had a negative impact on South Asia, as it had contributed inter alia to the post-



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### Cold War India-U.S strategic alignment.

The remaining five papers were presented in the last session under the heading, Political Issues and Perspectives. Sadeq Khan, in his paper, "Bangladesh and SAARC: Security, Environment and Related Issues", emphasized the need to integrate environmental, developmental and mercantile concerns, as well as national institutions, like the military, for organizing a strong state, which, he felt, remained a key prerequisite for the success of the SAARC. Syed Anwar Husain, on the other hand, in his paper, "SAARC and Ethnicity : A Dream in a Cauldron", remained sceptic about the success of the SAARC unless the issue of ethnicity in South Asia was resolved. Amena Mohsin and Bhumitra Chakma in their paper, "The Myth of Nation Building and Security of Bangladesh : The Case of Chittagong Hill Tracts", contended that it is not the politics of ethnicity as such, but the politics of nation-state itself, which was threatening to tear apart the fabric of modern state-building in South Asia, the latter in turn complicating the internal-external security dimension of the region and the prospect of regional cooperation. Prashanta Tripura, in his paper "Colonialist Barriers to National Integration : Modern Bangladesh and the Problem of 'Hill People'" further theorized the notion of modernity and its link with the development of colonial consciousness. Limiting his examination to the condition of the Hill people in Bangladesh, he stressed the need to decolonize our minds, both for healthy development of the concerned polity and the region. Finally, Ehsanul Haque, in his paper, "Kashmir Factor in Indo-Pakistan Relations : Politico-security Implications" strongly advocated a just resolution of the Kashmir question, without which, he agreed, the prospect of SAARC remained bleak.

Presentation of each paper was followed by lively and thought-provoking discussions during which several important ideas emerged as was summarized in the form of proceedings adopted at the conclusion of the seminar. The main highlights of the proceedings are:

\* The seminar was of the view that the recent far-reaching changes in the international political, economic and strategic order have significantly added to the imperatives for strengthening of regional cooperation in South Asia.



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\* It was agreed that the SAARC had already created the institutional structures, and thereby, also the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation among South Asian States. It had also contributed to the South Asian public opinion in favour of further sustenance of the process of cooperation within SAARC.

\* The participants took a unanimous position that in order to be effective for the peoples of the region, the SAARC must immediately include the core economic areas into its agenda of cooperation. They welcomed the progress and basic preparatory works already made in this regard and opined that as a concrete step toward promoting intra-regional trade the proposed SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement must be immediately implemented. The participants also highlighted the urgency for South Asia to obtain the much needed competitive edge in the international trade and investment markets. Towards that end it was considered important for South Asia to strengthen cooperation in science and technology, with emphasis on creativities and expertise available within the region. The need for sharing of experiences with other regions was also stressed. Considering the abiding peculiarities of the region, it was further noted that labour-intensive technologies should receive the immediate priority.

\* The seminar took the view that the main focus of the proposed programmes for poverty alleviation in South Asia must be on ways and means to bring the millions of impoverished masses to the mainstream of the planning and development processes. The long term objective should be to optimally utilize the potential productive capacity of the poor. In this connection, the seminar understood that sustainable development in South Asia was conditional upon a combination of high growth rate with time bound and target-oriented attacks on poverty. The need for integrating the women with the mainstream was also particularly stressed and it was observed that the recognition of the importance of women as a socially, economically and politically active force was vital for sustainable development in the region.

\* The participants noted the success of poverty alleviation programmes at the non-governmental level in South Asia. It was underscored that through sharing of experiences amongst



each other such NGOs may substantially complement efforts at the governmental level. In this respect an idea of periodic SAARC conferences of NGOs involved in related fields was discussed. Such conferences, it was understood, would also contribute to the promotion of closer people-to-people contacts within the region.

\* The concept of Dal-bhat as a catalyst to food security in the region was elaborately deliberated. The participants stressed the multi-dimensional implications of the term - ethical, social, legal and economic. Particular emphasis was given to the economically productive aspect, and it was opined that with food security ensured, the productivity of the peoples, particularly of the poorer sections, can be substantially enhanced. The seminar also stressed that a South Asian Charter of Human Rights should include the right to basic human needs for every South Asian individual.

\* The problems related with severe and chronic external economic dependence of South Asian countries also drew considerable focus of the debate. Having considered enormous economic and political implications of external dependence, the participants were of the opinion that long term practical measures must be adopted to reduce the dependence. It was also argued that the debate on external dependence should focus increasingly on the issue of nature and selectivity, rather than the quantum of aid inflow. In this context, indications of changes in global economic power balance in the form of subgroupings within the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development were also noted. The participants opined that the likely consequences of these changes should be an important subject for the SAARC countries to study.

\* It was noted that the South Asian economies, keeping pace with the global trend, were proceeding speedily towards the market economic system. While acknowledging the virtues of the free-enterprise system as the vehicle of growth, the participants noted that in the particular South Asian situation the indiscriminate use of the market mechanism may be counterproductive for the objective of poverty alleviation. It was reminded that the free play of market forces had the potential of further marginalizing the socio-economically disadvantaged groups, particularly the poor. The need for ensuring appropriate



balancing mechanisms to protect the interest of such groups was underscored.

\* It was observed that cooperation among South Asian States was an inevitable necessity in the field of environment and related issues. Considerable attention was focused on the implications of global climatic change on the South Asian states individually and collectively. It was also observed that as least developed nations South Asia was amongst the worst victims of these changes. The participants opined that the SAARC Member States as a group must play more active roles in relevant international forums and negotiations on related fields. It was considered appropriate that they should jointly contribute to the realization of the proposal for the Global Convention on Environment and Poverty Alleviation raised during the Earth Summit. The seminar also considered the environmental implications or problems related to conflicts at sub-state level and stressed the need for long term measures - political, economic, as well as scientific - for the prevention of further environmental degradation within the region.

\* A considerable part of the debate was focused on the problems and distortions in the process of nation building of most of the South Asian States. The political and security implications of various types of intra-state conflicts, particularly those associated with the problems of integration of sub-national groups and social and political instabilities caused by ethnic, linguistic, religious, sectarian and related problems drew the interest of the participants. These problems generally constituted the source of both intra-state as well as inter-state tensions and thereby impeded the SAARC process. In this context, the need for promotion of greater people-to-people contact, particularly cultural and educational exchanges was stressed.

\* The participants debated on the continuing divergences in security perspectives of the states in the South Asian region and their mutual mistrust, often linked with historical memories which led to "perceived" rather than "real" threats from each other. The continued failure to attain any meaningful progress in resolving the whole gamut of outstanding bilateral problems also prominently figured in the discussions. While the need for intensifying efforts towards resolving these problems



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received considerable attention, the seminar was also of the view that the existence of bilateral problems in inter-state relations was a reality in almost every regional context. It was understood that with a positive and forward looking approach the countries of South Asia should concentrate more on areas of convergence than on those of divergence which would serve the cause of regional cooperation within SAARC. The participants were of the view that to keep pace with global developments, there was an immediate imperative for introducing disarmament in South Asia as a subject of deliberations within SAARC. Concrete measures needed to be taken to benefit economically from "South Asian peace dividends" and for that a SAARC Study Group on Disarmament and Development may be soon established with the participation of concerned officials and experts.

\* The participants welcomed the recent positive developments in the region in terms of the establishment of democratic order in the member states of SAARC. It was hoped that this would contribute to greater understanding and cooperation at the political level. It was further opined that decentralization of local level planning and widening of the level and scope of effective popular participation in the political and economic process would contribute to the further strengthening of participatory democratic institutions in the member states and thereby to the SAARC process.

\* The seminar agreed that regional cooperation was the most vital catalyst for confidence building in South Asia. It further stressed that continuous ongoing dialogue between various non-governmental organizations to promote greater understanding within South Asia was an inevitable necessity. In addition, it was also felt that there was a strong need for evolving permanent linkages and professional exchanges in a more concrete form between various South Asian institutions working and specializing on related issues.

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Dhaka, December 1992

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