

## ARTICLES

# SAARC debacle highlights emerging new order in South Asia

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The indefinite postponement of the 19th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), scheduled for mid-November in Pakistan's capital Islamabad could mark the burial of an old order and offer the chance of a new beginning in one of the world's most fractured regions.

It reflects the growing isolation of Pakistan within the region and allows India to assume leadership in achieving the elusive goal of creating mutual trust, economic exchanges and connectivity in South Asia to promote the region's prosperity.

The unprecedented threat of a total boycott of the summit by India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives in protest over an attack by Pakistan-backed terrorists on an Indian military camp at Uri in disputed Kashmir on Sept. 18 can be seen as a positive omen.

The united stand among the SAARC member states to condemn jihadist terrorism emanating from Pakistan and the coordinated moves to isolate Pakistan show that the regional body is willing to enforce norms and shame offenders.

The collective message from South Asian nations, including Muslim-majority ones, to Islamabad is that it should stop using religious fundamentalists as proxy warriors or be isolated. The charter of SAARC lacks legal provisions for expelling a member, but Pakistan has been put on notice that it faces de facto marginalization. Such a condemnation of a member country is exceptional in South Asia.

During its three decades, the eight-nation SAARC has occasionally witnessed cancellations of summits owing to bilateral spats. In 1989, Sri Lanka was upset at India's disastrous peacekeeping intervention there and called off the summit it was slated to host. After the quasi-war between India and Pakistan in 1999 over Kashmir, there was another freeze with no summits for four years.

Whenever such summit interruptions happened due to bad blood involving two member states, it drew complaints from the rest of the group that the progressive multilateral agenda of SAARC was being held hostage by regressive bilateral disputes. Resentment that India and Pakistan, in particular, were using SAARC as a forum to continue their rivalry, preventing the organization from achieving its true potential, used to be widely prevalent in the capitals of the smaller South Asian countries.

### **A shift in the wind**

This time is different. Instead of lumping together India with Pakistan as the two largest member countries that are acting selfishly and sabotaging wider regional interests, most of the SAARC states have come out openly in favor of India's position that Pakistan's use of terrorism as a foreign policy tool is absolutely unacceptable.

In a departure from previous times when the SAARC countries would adopt a neutral and skeptical stance on violent incidents involving India and Pakistan as if both sides were equally to blame, they are now lining up in principle behind India as it ramps up a bold counteroffensive in response to the Uri attack.

Early on Sept. 29, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered his military to conduct "surgical strikes" against jihadist training camps across the border in Pakistan. Much to Pakistan's discomfiture, this surprise show of force for deterrence was welcomed by SAARC countries.

Bangladesh, which has confronted an Islamist menace linked to Pakistan for decades, stated that India had a "legal internationally accepted right to make a response to any attack on her sovereignty and her soil." Afghanistan, another SAARC nation that has been harassed by Pakistan-sponsored jihadists like the Taliban and the Haqqani network, applauded Modi for directly confronting the issue and urged him to continue "self-defense in the form of action that we saw." Sri Lanka said it "condemned terrorism in all forms" and stressed "the need to deal with the issue of terrorism in the region in a decisive manner." Nepal demanded that SAARC members "ensure that their territories are not used for cross-border terrorism."

SAARC has historically been an ineffective forum known for platitudes that are not backed by action. But the manner in which Modi has energized the group through the innovative formula of 'SAARC minus one,' meaning promoting sub-regional security and economic cooperation by keeping out Pakistan, is creating space for moving ahead with "plurilateral" sets of interested nations to bypass stalemates caused by Pakistan and enhance economic linkages.

Modi has already laid the foundation for a series of concrete energy, communications and trade projects via a "coalition of the willing" involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India. His proactive Indian Ocean diplomacy has raised prospects for spreading the benefits of economic collaboration with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. He is also ramping up regional integration via the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, which connects some SAARC countries with Thailand and Myanmar.

The goal of seven of the eight SAARC member countries coming together in various combinations, with India serving as the hub in each sub-group, to enable cross-border trade, free movement of capital and skilled professionals, and joint industrial production -- among other initiatives -- is moving closer to reality now that Pakistan is out of the picture.

**India rises to the fore**

Pakistan once hoped to galvanize SAARC and enlist the support of its smaller states to counterbalance what it claimed was the bossiness, exploitation and meddling by India. Modi has put a stop to this by convincing SAARC members that India's dynamic economic growth and liberal economic leadership alone can pull the region out of its problems.

Divided by interstate rivalries, ethnic cleavages and unresolved territorial disputes, SAARC has consistently overpromised and underdelivered, much to the frustration of its total population of 1.57 billion. Unlike other regions such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe and Latin America, South Asia ranks near the bottom of human development indices and is saddled with low per capita incomes.

These dismal socioeconomic facts are glaring daily reminders of the urgent need for SAARC to get its act together, if not in entirety, then at least in arrangements that leave Pakistan out in the cold.

Pakistan has two options. First, it can humbly bow to the reality of being rejected by SAARC and abandon its policy of promoting Islamist extremism to rejoin the South Asian mainstream. Second, it can disregard SAARC and increase its dependence on its "all weather" ally China. The Beijing factor is vital for Pakistan in light of the proposed \$46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor, whose fate is uncertain owing to persistent insecurity in Pakistan.

Sidelined by SAARC and facing global pariah status as a troubling source of Islamist radicalism, Pakistan has no one to fall back on except China. But even for China, returns on its massive financial commitment in the CPEC are hardly guaranteed because of internal instability in Pakistan. As a major investor, Beijing has to press Islamabad to at least curb, if not terminate, its jihadist addiction. Retaining the old policy of fomenting Islamist radicalism as a force multiplier to gain leverage in South Asia looks like becoming less viable for Pakistan in future.

Modi's gambit of trying to galvanize SAARC on the diplomatic front, mixed with a demonstration of countervailing military power against Pakistan, has pushed South Asia toward a brave new horizon. His bet is that Pakistan will ultimately feel the pressure, sense the dominant mood of SAARC and return to the fold as a responsible player. The summit meetings can then resume.



*Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonipat, India. He is the author of the book '**Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister**'*