**SAARC is Dead**

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On December 8, the Caretaker Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar extended felicitations to the SAARC Member States and the people of South Asia on the 39th SAARC Charter Day hoping for the resolution of issues impeding the revival of the eight-member organisation. In his greetings message, Prime Minister Kakar said, “I am confident that the current hindrances to the Organisation’s smooth functioning will be removed, thus enabling the SAARC member states to forge ahead on the path of mutually beneficial regio¬nal cooperation.”
Prime Minister Kakar’s message comes at a time when the much-touted organisation seems to have lost its sheen despite repeated offers from Pakistan to resume mandatory summits. The last complete SAARC summit was hosted by Nepal in 2014. The next summit was due in Pakistan in 2016 but it was stalled after India pulled out, with the support of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan, following the Pulwama terror attack that New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based terrorists. In January 2022, Pakistan offered to host the summit again, proposing a virtual option for India’s participation if it was reluctant to attend physically, however, reiterating its previous allegations, India turned down the offer.
Established in 1985 with lofty goals such as accelerating economic growth, strengthening collective self-reliance, and contributing to mutual trust among others. Yet, SAARC has confronted never ending stumbling blocks largely due to the prolonged rivalry between its two major members, India and Pakistan. South Asia is among the least integrated regions in the world with intra-regional trade accounts for just 5 percent of the total trade. Reactivating SAARC has become hugely important because South Asia is facing challenges like never before. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the world’s first, fifth and eightieth most populated countries, respectively, and the markets potential lies in its younger population where almost half of the population in the region is under the age of 24. This youth bulge is more adept at using technology and more open to relishing its advantage. India has huge potential of becoming a technology giant as world’s leading IT hubs are moving to India. The onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4) is being driven by the internet, advancement in cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. The World Bank has considered South Asia to become a hub for innovation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This would, however, largely be defined by the role of the governments in how they sidelined prolonged standoffs and replaced it with incentive to firms that bring about these technological innovations. A healthy competition needs to be adopted in order to attract foreign investment.
Climate-change-induced rainstorms, drought, and mounting temperatures turned increasingly common across South Asia, making it one of the world’s most vulnerable regions to the impacts of global warming. Lack of arable land, acute water shortages, intensive heat patterns and repeated displacement of populations are some of the key challenges the region is confronting with climate experts predicting irreversible consequences. According to the World Bank, 750 million people in South Asia have been affected by at least one natural disaster in the past two decades while studies have warned climate change-induced loss and damage could cost South Asia USD 518 billion by 2050. Given the sensitivity of the matter, it is high time for the SAARC to sit together and seriously think about addressing climate change effects which could severely impact millions of people in the region, irrespective of caste, creed and boundaries. Worsening air quality in SAARC countries, particularly in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is another area where cooperation is inevitable, sooner than later. Toxic air pollution, unprecedented and annual, disrupts the lives of millions of people in South Asia forcing extended closure of schools and businesses, impacting sporting events and governments urging people to stay behind closed doors. According to the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) report, poor air pollution is reducing life expectancy by five years on average for people in South Asia. Although SAARC countries have started trying to address pollution through installing air quality monitors, management plans and pushing citizens to adopt electric vehicles ultimately reducing reliance on fossil fuels but these are individual efforts which have yielded little to no results.
The region faces multiple common threats, both traditional and non-traditional. It may be hard for Pakistan and India to give up on traditional issues, such as Kashmir and terrorism, but the adverse impact of non-traditional threats on the entire region should bring the two-sides close which would ultimately reactivate SAARC. India’s participation in the long overdue SAARC summit in Pakistan could be a first step in this regard. If SAARC countries help organisation work as other regional organisations usually function, this would not be a win-win situation for a single country rather the whole region and millions of people would be benefitting.