

SAARC Summit - General Discussion

by Dr Apurba Kundu

Mr Malcolm Subhan, Chair of the Luncheon Briefing and Vice Chair of the European Institute for Asian Studies, wondered whether given the co-operation shown at the SAARC Summit, do the ambassadors adopt a collective approach to the EU in discussing issues of mutual concern; for instance, as regards preferential trade? In reply, H.E. Mr Tariq Fatemi said not as yet. However, the EU has publicly and privately expressed great happiness at the results of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad. Their representatives have already started studying how to assist these measures in becoming more fruitful. Relations between SAARC and the EU are at a very early stage of development, but are looking very hopeful. Ambassador Fatemi suggested that this has always been the goal of EU representatives. Ms Maria Carrilho, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and Chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Delegation to South Asia said she was aware of the great desire of South Asian people to travel within the region. The EU can do more, both formally and informally, in making sure that SAARC process continues: 'Our influence can be greater than our assignments', she said. The EU should do all it can to try and develop further links between Europe and South Asia, including co-operation between universities and links between civil society organisations. Mr Thomas Mann MEP and Vice Chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Delegation to South Asia noted he had much experience with the region being Vice Chair since 1994 and as President of the Tibet Parliamentary InterGroup. Regarding the SAARC Summit in Islamabad, he said, it is 'amazing for us to hear this excellent result'. Mann recalled visiting Islamabad before the Summit and hearing people say that they were distrustful of it coming up with any results, since bilateral conflict cannot be discussed at SAARC. Many of the local parliamentarians he met also said progress could not happen. Mann also recalled how, when his delegation met with Musharraf, the Pakistan President said that he does so much to fight terrorism in Pakistan and other countries, but that this is not being recognised adequately.

Mr Thomas Mann asked whether the results of the SAARC Summit are all just talk? What concrete measures are being taken? In reply, H.E. Mr Tariq Fatemi said that Summits are not all talk citing, for instance, the Terrorism Protocol which spells out how to combat terrorism in the region, especially as to the financing of terrorist groups. The EU has already offered, and we are already talking of how to strengthen institutions that combat terrorism.

Ms Shada Islam, journalist and member of the Board of the European Institute for Asian Studies noted that the EU Troika would visit South Asia in February 2004. What exactly does SAARC want from the EU, she asked? Are there areas for co-operation between the SAARC countries in international forums? In reply, H.E. Mr. P.K. Singh said India enjoys numerous meetings with the EU on a regular basis, for example, meeting with the EU Troika every six months, and there also is an annual EU-India Summit. So what is discussed is pretty standard. Note that there is an open dialogue at the Troika meetings, he said. The agenda is only indicative and both parties are free to discuss what they want; for example, the UN, Iraq, weapons proliferation. The countries of SAARC often co-operate in international forums; for example, our positions at the recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) Summit were

very close. On issues such as trade in textiles and sugar, we have many common positions, and have often co-operated in presenting these at international meetings. H.E. Mr Tariq Fatemi added that the EU Troika would be coming to Pakistan in February 2004. We have an ad hoc arrangement with the EU. However, we discuss issues of concern with the EU. The European Parliament should have no misgivings with the representational strength of Pakistan's domestic politics. With the Troika, we will discuss politics, economics and commercial matters, as well as how the EU and Pakistan can strengthen co-operation in combating terrorism, he said.

Mr Peter Roell, Minister Counsellor, Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU asked the panel for examples of how to foster closer relations among the SAARC members states? In reply, H.E. Mr. Maudud Ali said the SAARC Summit in Islamabad addressed specific agenda items of co-operation that would render maximum benefits, including a regional energy system, anti-terrorism and free trade. In the past, we have seen the effectiveness of Track II methods as well, which have encouraged the promotion of culture and sports in South Asia. We know that we get the highest number of television viewers for a cricket match between India and Pakistan. These have been taking place everywhere in the world—for instance, Sharjah, Dubai and Toronto—except South Asia. There is a tremendous potential for the media to develop exchanges. H.E. Mr Narayan S. Thapa commented that technical communities covering a large range of areas in the EU and South Asia have long agreed to speak to each other. These are continuing to develop within a system of seven specific communities.

Mr Nawab Khan, journalist, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) asked if the free movement of goods and persons is essential to economic development. What plans are there for extending visas to the people of South Asia so they may travel freely within the region? In reply, H.E. Mr Tariq Fatemi agreed that free movement was essential. Measures are being taken in this area and we have already agreed to an extension of visas to parliamentarians, judges and journalists. We are also very conscious, he said, of the need to develop and promote tourism. Of course, this very much depends on extending visas, an idea that is always been pushed vigorously by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Mr. John Chalmers, Senior Correspondent, Reuters, noted that Ambassador Fatemi had stated that the people of Kashmir must not be ignored. Should there be a plebiscite in Kashmir—because Musharraf has said this is not necessary? In reply, H.E. Mr. Tariq Fatemi said we should be clear on this. Musharraf did not rule out a plebiscite. What he said was that, as the issue of Kashmir has remained unresolved for 50 years, the leaders of Pakistan and India should show imagination in looking for a solution. For the sake of beginning a dialogue, we should use our imagination. However, the people of Kashmir must be taken into account, for 'any solution that does not satisfy them will be a prolongation' of the conflict. By now, the Indian deputy prime minister has already met with leaders of the Kashmiri movement. This is a remarkable development. H.E. Mr P.K. Singh said that, led by [Indian] Deputy Prime Minister [L.K.] Advani, all senior officials dealing with Kashmir are even today meeting with the Hurriyat. This in itself is a notable development. The Hurriyat leadership 'has shown political courage' in coming to Delhi to meet with the highest Indian leadership.

Mr Dick Gupwell, Secretary General, European Institute for Asian Studies outlined that he had always said how useful SAARC was, but many have scoffed at this. Thus, I was struck by the Indian ambassador's remarks that a groundswell has been building up over the years in favour of regional co-operation. I have noticed this great enthusiasm at numerous conferences over the years. Maybe, that building up of pressure is finally being seen in concrete results. Will increased regional co-operation, especially the agreement to proceed with SAFTA, mean strengthening the SAARC secretariat in Kathmandu? In reply, H.E. Mr Narayan S. Thapa said that, at present, the SAARC secretariat has a Secretary General rotated between the seven member states. My personal feeling is that the SAARC secretariat should be strengthened. However, there are many cells in the foreign ministries of the member states that already look after SAARC. But manpower has to be increased to ensure the enforcement of SAARC decisions. H.E. Mr Maudud Ali noted that several sources suggest that SAARC has been 'just limping along' on a very limited payroll and budget. The secretariat will need strengthening.

Dr Apurba Kundu, Senior Research Fellow, European Institute for Asian Studies, wondered whether, at the risk of 'raining on the parade' of the highly positive outcome of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad, the success of the Summit was very much due to the personal relationship forged between Musharraf, who has escaped two recent assassination attempts, and Vajpayee, a man of advanced years. Will the re-invigorated SAARC survive after Musharraf and Vajpayee have departed the scene?

In reply, H.E. Mr Tariq Fatemi said support for SAARC is strong. He recalled that a reception at the home of the Indian ambassador in Islamabad after the Summit was attended by representatives of all the political parties in Pakistan. He expressed confidence that the agreements reached at the SAARC Summit in Islamabad would be supported by all political parties in Pakistan. H.E. Mr. P.K. Singh added that personal diplomacy and the personal chemistry of leaders have become a very important part of diplomacy today. It is not a cliché to say that the SAARC Summit in Islamabad was a defining moment. There is clearly good personal chemistry between Musharraf and Vajpayee, which comes but rarely. There also was personal chemistry between [then Pakistan Prime Minister] Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv Gandhi, but the moment was lost due to unfortunate developments. Therefore, one must be a little wary of the current euphoria. There is one important difference between then and today. There is one important difference, however, between then and now, he said. Then, they [the political leaders] were trying to carry public opinion. Today, the political leaders have broad public opinion behind them. Not just the intelligentsia wants relations in South Asia to improve; today the move seems motivated from below. ■

See also

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