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Issue Brief

Appointment of New Secretary General of SAARC: A New Dawn in the Making?

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Pakistan has taken responsibility of the Secretary General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for the second time. Amjad Hussain B. Sial Special Secretary at the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan has become the 13th Secretary General of SAARC after Nepal's Arjun Bahadur Thapa's term ended on February 28, 2017. Sial also served as the Director in the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu from 2003-2006. He previously served as Ambassador of Pakistan to Tajikistan from 2011-2014. He was also the alternate Permanent Representative at Pakistan Mission to the United Nations, New York during 2011-2014. Ambassador Sial assumed the charge of his new office on March 1, 2017 and will continue to serve for a three year period till February 28, 2020.¹

The nomination was made by the Council of Ministers in Pokhara (Nepal) in March 2016. Initially, India had hindered the nomination of Ambassador Sial as the Secretary General on procedural grounds. In this regard, Delhi pointed towards Article V of the MoU on the establishment of the SAARC Secretariat, which details the procedure for the appointment of the secretary general and under which the appointment has to be approved by the SAARC Council of Ministers comprising foreign ministers of the member states.²

India justified its objection by stating that the nomination had to be ratified by the Council of Ministers conference in Islamabad, which could not happen due to postponement of the summit after India and some of its regional allies pulled out from attending the meeting which was supposed to be held in November 2016. Moreover, the ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan also added fuel to fire. Delhi blatantly stated that "India has conveyed to the current SAARC Chair in Nepal that increasing cross-border terrorists attacks in the region and increasing interference in the internal matters of member states by one country has created an environment that is not conducive to the successful holding of the SAARC summit"³

¹ <http://etapps.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/no-objection-to-pakistans-amjab-hussain-b-sial-at-saarc-shows-thaw-in-ties/articleshow/57438299.cms>

² <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/indias-objection-to-a-pakistani-secretary-general-may-hurt-saarc.475521/>)

³ (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1286460>)

However, later on, Delhi sent its consent following a series of diplomatic efforts from member states which paved way for the revival of any semblance of regional grouping⁴. Moreover, a copy of an Indian diplomatic note dated May 30, 2016 conveying its concurrence to Mr Sial's appointment as secretary general was shared with *Dawn News*⁵ which is evidence of New Delhi irrationally raising issues over the appointment. Receipt of concurrence to Mr Sial's appointment from all eight member states was also notified by the SAARC Secretariat on September 8, 2016⁶. Otherwise, by blocking the nomination, India was hurting the credibility of SAARC - which, without a doubt, is one of the best forums for taking up regional matters in South Asia.

This endeavour by India was highly criticized by Pakistani officials who accused Delhi for wrongfully engaging in "delaying tactics". Pakistan insisted that all member states including India should endorse the nomination.⁷ In a meeting with the former Secretary General of SAARC, Arjun Bahadur Thapa, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Mr. Sartaj Aziz highlighted that "India impeded the SAARC process and violated the spirit of the SAARC Charter which is damaging image of SAARC."⁸

Appointment of an experienced diplomat can help revive and strengthen the SAARC. Pakistan attaches great significant to regional integration and SAARC provides just that because it encompasses promotion and enhancement of economic stability, social progress, and cultural development and welfare of the people of South Asia.

In the present regional environment, SAARC is enshrouded by major rifts between Pakistan and India. More difficult days due to the regional tensions can be expected in the future. There are a number of challenges weighing in on Sial's shoulders. These included arranging the 19th SAARC Summit in Pakistan as soon as possible so as to put the whole SAARC process back on track. For this, he has the paramount task of bringing both India and Pakistan on one table and create a conducive environment for talks.

The appointment of an experienced diplomat will surely help to revive and fortify SAARC. For this particular purpose, all member states should come together and engage in timely and effective implementation of activities and programmes so as to ensure strong regional integration. Internal and bilateral tensions of member states must not be allowed to damage the effectiveness of SAARC.

⁴ <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/02/25/india-endorses-pakistans-nomination-for-saarc-post/>

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1311965>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1286460>)

⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1317824>

Moreover, out of the box solutions should be explored to mobilize resources and investment to ensure the successful implementation of policies. A prime example is SAARC agenda for the promotion of welfare of children. Something along the lines of Grameen Bank's microfinance scheme in Bangladesh can also be done. Such initiatives will help achieve the major goal of sustainable socio-economic development.