



38th SAARC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING: SETTING THE NOTCH FOR THE UPCOMING SUMMIT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Council of Ministers gathered in an informal session in New York on September 21, 2017 on the sidelines of the Seventy-second Session of the United Nations General Assembly.¹

The meeting was chaired by Mr. Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Nepal, who presided over the deliberations of the session, attended by Foreign Ministers of SAARC member states except Sri Lanka. Secretary General of SAARC, Amjad B. Sial, was also present at the occasion.

The agenda of the meeting focused on organising the next SAARC Summit. The meeting concluded on a note for the Secretariat to set the date for Summit. In his opening remarks, the Chairperson highlighted the important initiatives taken by Nepal, as the Chair of SAARC, in pursuing the directives of the Eighteenth SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014. He emphasised the need for further deepening regional cooperation and connectivity and in this regard called for hosting the SAARC Summit at the earliest convenient date.²

¹ "SAARC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETS NEW YORK 21 SEPTEMBER 2017", *SAARC Secretariat*, September 23, 2017

http://saarc-sec.org/news/detail_front/saarc-council-of-ministers-meets-new-york-21-september-2017

² "72nd UNGA Session", *Permanent Mission of Nepal to the United Nations*, September 22, 2017

<http://mofa.gov.np/press-release-issued-permanent-mission-nepal-united-nations-new-york-regarding-72nd-unga-22-sept-2017/>

Mr. Amjad Hussain B. Sial also addressed the informal session of the Council. In his brief remarks, he apprised the Foreign Ministers of the progress achieved in the implementation of the decisions of the 18th SAARC Summit in November 2014, and the last Session of the Council of Ministers held in Pokhara, Nepal in March 2016.³

He mentioned the meeting of Interior/Home Ministers in Colombo on July 13, 2016 in which they took a number of decisions for countering terrorism and drug abuse, promoting peace and security and improving the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme. Another meeting of the Health Ministers was held on July 29, 2016 in which the ministers endorsed a proposal for establishing SAARC Medical University. The Health Ministers also accepted the offer by Sri Lanka to host the Medical University.⁴

Referring to the progress achieved by 18th SAARC Summit, he highlighted that it was decided to hold the Summits every two years, or earlier, if necessary; the Council of Ministers Meetings once a year; the Standing Committee meetings at least once a year; and the Programming Committee meetings at least twice a year. This decision by the SAARC leaders is yet to be implemented.

He also stressed that the fundamental requirement for regional integration is connectivity and considered this as being essential for the promotion of economic relations, people-to-people contacts and tourism.

According to him, few modest measures have been taken under his supervision to enhance efficiency, efficacy and visibility of SAARC and its Secretariat. A new website was launched in June 2017. For effective monitoring and implementation of decisions, the Secretariat regularly updates matrixes of decisions by the Member States for circulation.⁵

The Ministers meeting in New York reiterated their full commitment to the SAARC process and stressed the need to promote progress and prosperity for the people of South Asian region through the platform of SAARC. In order to enhance economic relations, people-to-people contacts and tourism, the Ministers emphasized on the need to improve connectivity in the region. They commended the work done by SAARC Secretariat and underlined that it should play an even greater role in promoting the objectives of SAARC. The Ministers also agreed to work on the dates for the 19th SAARC Summit and tasked the Secretariat with its coordination.

³ "SAARC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETS NEW YORK 21 SEPTEMBER 2017", *SAARC Secretariat*, September 23,2017

⁴ http://saarc-sec.org/news/detail_front/saarc-council-of-ministers-meets-new-york-21-september-2017
Ibid.

⁵ "SAARC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETS NEW YORK 21 SEPTEMBER 2017", *SAARC Secretariat*, September 23,2017
http://saarc-sec.org/news/detail_front/saarc-council-of-ministers-meets-new-york-21-september-2017

India has cautioned that cooperation among SAARC countries “remains at serious risk due to rising number of threats and incidents” that threaten the region’s peace and stability. Addressing the meeting, India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said major South Asian initiatives for cooperation in sectors like connectivity, energy and free trade have not moved forward and that SAARC needs to deliver on its commitments in order to remain relevant. She said, “Regional prosperity, connectivity and cooperation can take place only in an atmosphere of peace and security in the region. It, however, remains at serious risk in the region. It is necessary for our region’s survival that we eliminate the scourge of terrorism in all its forms, without any discrimination, and end the ecosystem of its support.”⁶

The statement by Shusma Sawraj seems like a jab at Pakistan rather than the shortcomings of SAARC as a whole, as she also tried to malign Pakistan in the UNGA session by referring to Pakistan as ‘Terroristan’ and an export factory for terror. It also speaks volumes about the lack of Indian commitment and will to use its potential in SAARC for achieving greater regional cooperation. Contrary to its ambitions to be a regional leader, its role seems to remain limited to lamenting and complaining instead of uniting the regional countries under the banner of SAARC. The most recent human rights’ violations committed by India on the working boundary against Pakistan are an example of how instead of playing its due role in SAARC, it is acting counterproductively towards establishing peace and security in the region. This is not a new phenomenon. After the Uri attack in September 2016 in Indian Occupied Kashmir, India tried to convince the world that Pakistan is a terrorist state and was behind this attack, and that it should be isolated. But India’s hopes are dying at the moment and it is looking for a way out from the crisis created by none other than India’s own Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, diplomatic efforts by the Indian government apparatus have not yet achieved the desired and expected outcome of isolating Pakistan internationally.

Pakistan's foreign minister, Khawaja Asif on the other hand, has reiterated Pakistan’s full commitment to the principles and objectives of SAARC, and highlighted the Organization’s potential in promoting progress and prosperity in South Asia through enhanced regional integration. He also stressed that Pakistan considered SAARC an important platform for organizing a collective response to regional challenges, particularly the region’s development needs. Pakistan, he said, wanted SAARC to utilize the full potential of the region and called for constructive engagement.⁷

⁶ News Desk, “Sushma Swaraj comes down heavily on Pakistan for terrorism: Official ”, *The Economic Times*, September 22, 2017

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sushma-swaraj-comes-down-heavily-on-pakistan-for-terrorism-official/articleshow/60792471.cms>

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, accessed October 11, 2017

<http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NTQyMA>,

It is hoped that China's entry into SAARC as a full-member can give much needed impetus to the "Slow moving Boat" of the SAARC. Growing alliances between China and Pakistan in terms of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) would be another factor that would help work in favour of regional progress.

Taking advantage of their presence in New York during the United Nations General Assembly meetings, the Foreign Ministers of SAARC have been meeting informally since 1987 on the sidelines to exchange views on the progress and potentials of SAARC. These informal meetings are an indication that SAARC is not a dormant organization and that it holds great potential as all members are facing similar regional challenges and are equally interested in regional integration. Apart from this, such informal meetings give SAARC representatives a chance to speak without pressure of formal and inflexible agendas. It also enables them to cooperate on a more informal and impromptu level, and discuss innovative ideas for better cooperation among the member states.