



SAARC: DELHI'S CONTINUED MARGINALIZATION AGENDA

By
Areeba Arif
Research Assistant

Edited by
Najam Rafique

January 30, 2018

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



On January 2, 2018, India has excluded Pakistan from the list of SAARC member countries with which it will be connecting its state-of-the-art National Knowledge Network (NKN) for sharing scientific databases and remote access to advanced research facilities.¹

The Modi government has also kicked off the process of appointing a telecom company that will connect and extend the NKN to research and education networks in six members of SAARC including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Pakistan is the only SAARC nation that has been left out of this initiative.²

NKN is a multi-gigabit pan-India network, which makes possible the development of India's communications infrastructure, stimulates research and creates next-generation applications and services.³ This new initiative will enable collaboration among researchers from different educational networks such as TEIN4, GARUDA, CERN and Internet2. It also enables sharing of scientific databases and remote access to advanced research facilities.⁴

¹ "India excludes Pakistan from SAARC initiative." *Pakistan Today*. Accessed January 25, 2018.

<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/01/03/india-excludes-pakistan-from-SAARC-initiative/>

² "India excludes Pakistan from a SAARC initiative." *The Economic Times*. January 03, 2018. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-excludes-pakistan-from-a-SAARC-initiative/articleshow/62345991.cms>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

NKN will be connected from Afghanistan to Delhi or Mumbai, from Bangladesh to Kolkata or Delhi, from Bhutan to Kolkata or Delhi, from Nepal to Kolkata or Delhi, from Maldives to Chennai or Mumbai and from Sri Lanka to Chennai or Mumbai.⁵ A state-of-the-art management centre and Network Operations Centre will also be set up to run the NKN network. The connection from Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka to India would be through a submarine cable for international connectivity.⁶

This is not the first time that India has tried to sideline Pakistan. This has been an ongoing occurrence after the Uri Base attack.⁷ Another strike to relations came in November 2016 when India impeded the 19th SAARC Summit which was supposed to be held in Pakistan and went on to convince other countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan to boycott the summit.⁸

After sabotaging the Summit, India also tried to halt the appointment of the New Secretary General, Amjad Hussian B Sial. India justified its actions by stating that the nominee had to be ratified by the Council of Ministers conference in Islamabad. Something which could not take place due to the postponement of the Summit.⁹

Soon after the appointment of the New Secretary General in March 2017, India hosted a meeting on March 21, 2017 of security chiefs from the seven member states of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The meeting was a first for the BIMSTEC group, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.¹⁰ This meeting focused on terrorism, cyber and maritime security challenges facing the region. It was decided in the meeting to establish a track 1.5 dialogue forum focused on security. Given the importance of cooperating on security-related matters, it was also decided to hold such meetings annually. It was no surprise that Pakistan was again left out of this meeting.¹¹

⁵ "India excludes Pakistan from SAARC initiative", *Pakistan Today*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/01/03/india-excludes-pakistan-from-SAARC-initiative/>

⁶ "Modi Government excludes Pakistan from list of SAARC nations for its State-of-the-Art National Knowledge Network Initiative." *Postcard*. January 09, 2018. Accessed January 25, 2018. <http://postcard.news/modi-government-excludes-pakistan-list-SAARC-nations-state-art-national-knowledge-network-initiative/>

⁷ "Uri Attack: India, Pakistan's Kashmir Dispute Flares Again." *Time*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <http://time.com/4498891/kashmir-uri-attack-india-pakistan-military-conflict/>

⁸ Baqir Sajjad Syed | Jawed Naqvi. "SAARC summit in doldrums after India pulls out." *DAWN.COM* September 28, 2016. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1286609>

⁹ Kathmandu Anil Giri Hindustan. "Appointment of SAARC secretary general hit by India-Pakistan tensions." *Times*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/appointment-of-SAARC-secretary-general-hit-by-india-pakistan-tensions/story-1b1wLC1CrEbquDvQRuQZkN.html>

¹⁰ Gurjar, Sankalp. "Is SAARC Doomed?" *The Diplomat*. April 01, 2017. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/is-SAARC-doomed/>

¹¹ Ibid.

There was another meeting in the month of October 2017 in which India again tried to push back SAARC and attempted to boost the significance of BIMSTEC. In his remarks during the meeting, Foreign Secretary of India S. Jaishankar referred to SAARC as a “jammed vehicle.”¹² In an implicit reference to Pakistan, he also said that “as one country” is not, and since the other seven-nation regional grouping BIMSTEC has members that are “broadly aligned” and “articulate similar aspirations”, and are connected to the other members of the South Asian regional bloc on the key issue of terrorism, it was unlikely that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could be revived.¹³

India has also tried to marginalize Pakistan on other forums as well. For instance, when Sushma Swaraj met SAARC foreign ministers in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in September 2017, India's disinterest in the summit was evident. This added to the downgrading of the entire organization. With India-Pakistan bilateral relations on the downturn, the domino impact on the South Asian body has only worsened.¹⁴

During her speech, Swaraj did not refer to the uncertainties surrounding the SAARC Summit, but stressed the primacy given to the removal of terrorism which in implicit terms was actually taking a jab at Islamabad: “Regional prosperity, connectivity and cooperation can take place only in an atmosphere of peace and security. ¹⁵It, 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.”¹⁶

It is evident that it is not Pakistan who is creating any hurdles in the successful implementation of SAARC's agenda, but in fact it is India which is trying to isolate Pakistan by using underhand tactics. India has used terrorism as a basis for suspension of official talks with Pakistan due to alleged terrorist attacks launched by groups from across the border. The chill in relations has spread out to other sectors such as research and scientific development as well - something, which negatively affects the entire region.

¹² Bagchi, Indrani. “Question mark over SAARC summit again” *The Times of India*. September 23, 2017. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/question-mark-over-SAARC-summit-again/articleshow/60801709.cms>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bagchi, Indrani. “Question mark over SAARC summit again .” *The Times of India*. September 23, 2017. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/question-mark-over-SAARC-summit-again/articleshow/60801709.cms>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

On the question of terrorism, it is again very clear that it is not Pakistan who is sponsoring terrorism. On the contrary, it is India funding radicalization in South Asia - especially in Pakistan. Kulbhushan Jadhav is a prime example of this.

India should also realize that it is not the only country in SAARC who can dominate all the other members. Instead, Delhi should remember the agenda of regional cooperation on which SAARC was formed and countries should use this forum for regional cooperation, not for rivalry. SAARC should not be the organization to prolong the rivalry among regional states, rather it should serve for greater regional cooperation and economic integration. If the region is thrown into negativity, India will suffer along with the others as well. This is something Delhi needs to keep in mind. After all, what goes around comes around.