Panel Discussion on
“Expectations from the 18th SAARC Summit”

Organized by
Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS)
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“Expectations from the 18th SAARC Summit”
Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks
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One day panel discussion on “Expectations from the 18th SAARC Summit” was held in Kathmandu, Nepal on Nov. 23, 2014 organised by Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) in cooperation with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). It was held under the auspices of the Consortium of South Asian Think-tanks (COSATT). The active participation from member organizations of COSATT network, prominent thinks tanks in the region; local governmental and nongovernmental organizations, civil society and media made the day long panel discussion a success. The discussion program was categorised into various sessions in which participants representing different organizations from the region and beyond spoke on expectations from the 18th SAARC summit.

The Director of CSAS, Dr. Nishchal Nath Pandey in his welcome address acquainted everyone that Government of Nepal is ready to host the 18th SAARC summit from Nov. 26, and committed to make this a truly historic one in logistic as well as in substantial terms. He said this summit is taking place with a theme of, ‘deeper integration for peace and prosperity’, which undoubtedly is important as SAARC moves into its third decade of existence. There is a need for prominent South Asian thinkers, academics, former SAARC Secretary Generals and think tank representatives to come together on a single platform to recommend ways to make SAARC an important engine for promoting regional cooperation in South Asia and boosting regional economic growth. Taking evidence from the successful cooperative endeavours of EU and ASEAN, people of South Asia have been increasingly hopeful about the need to rise above narrow nationalistic sentiments and focus on the larger interest of this vast, vibrant and a dynamic region, he added. Dr. Pandey further said that at present, there is a need to focus on three critical things; first is the institutional structure of SAARC, secondly the role of observers and finally implementation of past agreements. South Asia has the potential and all the necessary ingredients in terms of human and natural resources to work for the development of this region, he said. Now the time has come to start delivering on the promises that it has made to the people of the region, he opined. He further stated that the COSATT has been fulfilling a long felt need for the think tanks and research institutions in South Asia to come together to develop close partnership and better ties for the objective of promoting regional cooperation and building peace in our region.

Maj. Gen. (retd.) Dipankar Banerjee, Mentor of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi said we have enormous expectations from the 18th SAARC summit and we are looking forward to the implementation of the past agreements. The world of 21st century is very different from 1985 when SAARC was founded. Major challenges we are facing today are no longer what it was 30 years ago he said and added whether it is global warming, decreasing water resources, rising oceanic level or ecological degradation...
and many other problems overflow national boundaries. We need to accept more than ever before that we share a common destiny and only together can we achieve peace and prosperity for all our people, he stated.

Gen. Banerjee further said that it is also important to identify the true enemy that SAARC is facing today; poverty and deprivation, absence of knowledge, lack of access to health and sanitation are major problems to the region. As major expectations from the 18th SAARC summit, Gen. Benerjee mentioned that no regional cooperation is possible in presence of mutual hostility among its members. Terrorism and extremism are the most dangerous problems of the time and the leaders of SAARC should give priority to counter terrorism without any compromise.

**Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka spoke about deepening educational connectivity in the region and reflected on South Asian University. He said that South Asian University formally started its journey in 2010, which is an achievement for SAARC however there is a need to revisit the university to indentify its present status. At present in the SAU out of fifty-five or so current faculties only five are from countries other than India, he said and added it indicates that it is not so much of a South Asian University as much as it is an Indian University of South Asia. He further said that establishment of South Asian regional campuses all over the region are important to sustain the University. Without the regional campuses it is not going to be South Asian in a true sense. He said the idea of establishing the University was not just to give academic knowledge to the regional students but also to give cultural orientation of different nations from all over the region, which is immensely important in the long run. He stressed on importance of exchange and movement of faculty members across the region. In his concluding remarks Prof. Imtiaz mentioned that it is easy to be a Bangladeshi, an Indian, or a Nepali or a Sri Lankan but difficult to be a South Asian and the real challenge lies there.

**Ahmed Saleem**, former SAARC Secretary General from The Maldives said that there is a lot of euphoria going around in the region especially in Nepal since it is hosting the 18th SAARC summit in a few days. People in the region expect much from the 18th Summit as it is a regional organization created primarily to improve the welfare and quality of life of the people in this region. He said no regional organization in Asia or Europe or South America has ever been successful without the active dialogue and partnership with the observers and external partners and SAARC cannot be an exception. SAARC needs observers and dialogue partners to learn from their experiences and success stories, he said and further added that SAARC needs Observers also to collaborate on mutually beneficial projects.

While talking about the role of observers he said it is encouraging that observers like EU, China, South Korea, Australia and Japan have been playing a very active role in SAARC. Reforms, fresh thinking and change of mindset is what we need today in SAARC after 29 years of its existence, he added.
Hon’ble Sayed Massadeq Khalili, Deputy Minister for Culture, Kabul said during three decades of war Afghanistan suffered a lot, war resulted into destruction of infrastructure and loss of lives. Most of the cultural and historical sites have been destroyed during the war. National museum of Afghanistan consisting over one hundred thousand precious items was looted. Unfortunately, from 2000 the life of Afghan people has been disturbed again. He said the government of Afghanistan and the ministry of information and culture have tried to popularize the principle of preserving cultural heritage. Cooperation with the international community and regional cooperation organizations such as SAARC would help to rebuild and develop Afghanistan. SAARC’s agenda of culture will help us strengthen and preserve our cultural heritage.

Jacqueline Gröth, Charge d’ affaires a.i., Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Kathmandu said trauma of two terrible wars in Europe actually made European integration possible and made it the only alternative for establishing peace and security for the people in the region. Nevertheless, EU is not only about peace and security among nations but European projects have also involved and reached to other aspects of people’s lives. The process of EU cannot merely rely on goodwill or political commitment of certain stakeholders she said and added an integration process also needs to be grounded in laws and institutions. In this respect the EU is unique, on the one hand we have the legitimacy of the democratic nation states and on the other, the legitimacy of supranational institutions like European Commission, European Court of Justice and European Parliament that protect and advance the general European interest. She also said SAARC is one of the least connected regions, however it has tremendous potential and resources to make this a thriving and a developed area in the world. She said to make this happen it requires commitment for open, accountable, inclusive and transparent institutions.

Chief Guest, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Nepal Hon’ble Mahendra Bahadur Pandey said South Asian nations face national as well as transnational challenges including poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, terrorism, climate change etc. He said this region also faces poor connectivity. We hope the declaration of the 18th SAARC summit would focus to addressing these and many other problems and bring about positive changes in the lives of the people in the region. Greater attention have been paid to the implementation of the specific projects and programs in time within post 2015 development agendas to bring productive and result oriented outcomes. With the collective will of the head of the states or government of SAARC, goals have also been set to make regional engagement more functional and relevant. He said, ’I believe that the 18th SAARC Summit with its key agenda of deepening integration will make the regional cooperation under SAARC more visible for the people of the region’. People of this region aspire for stable, prosperous and peaceful South Asia he said and added we should be guided by the aspiration of one fourth of humanity living in this region.

Amb. Neelam Deo, Director, Gateway House, Mumbai said SAARC should set feasible and achievable agendas and the 18th Summit should not make false promises to the people in the region like other summits in the past. She said when many of today’s successful regional organizations began, they had one common security concern which is different
in case of SAARC. South Asia does not have a common external security threat. The existing problem of SAARC is that it feels threatened from within its own structure. Amb. Deo further said the problems in the global strategic setting are in some ways also causing certain level of tension within our region. We are in a global situation where heightened nationalism is a growing phenomenon all over and particularly in Asia. Nevertheless, regionalism is also a growing phenomenon and countries are coming together in regional groupings. Therefore in some ways we are always trying to have a balance between the nationalism that operates in our countries and the imperative of regionalism, which is well recognised across governments, civil society and people in our region.

Mohammad Hanif, Research Coordinator, IPRI, Islamabad spoke on ‘Economic Integration in SAARC Countries: Overcoming Major Challenges’. He said currently South Asia is the second fastest growing region in the world and by 2025 South Asia will have a middle class of one million young people who will force this region into being dynamic, educated and prosperous. He said SAARC deserves credit for setting up the progress towards economic integration, however in comparison with other regional organizations despite signing the SAPTA and SAFTA, intra regional trade has remained as low as 5% in SAARC. He further said, delay in finalization of list of sensitive items, lack of proper rules of goods to be traded, regulation for revenue loss, compensation to less developed countries, delay in creating mechanism to remove non tariff barriers are major reasons for SAFTA’s weak performance.

Maj. Gen. AKM Abdur Rahman, Director General, BIISS, Dhaka spoke on ‘18th SAARC Summit: Hope and Aspirations’. He said from 18th SAARC summit, people of this region have more expectations than in the past summits. Instead of going for a wide range of cooperation and collaboration among the member states, SAARC should pick up certain specific agendas which can be achieved in given time he said. Bringing up many unachievable issues merely creates false hopes to the people in the region. Connectivity and energy cooperation are two key needs of South Asia at present and SAARC’s upcoming summit should make this its primary agenda. As a form of recommendation, Gen. Rahman said we should have a SAARC parliament like EU Parliament. Similarly there should be executive body which will be responsible for coordinating and executing all decisions being made in SAARC.

Gauri Khandekar, Head, Agora Asia-Europe Program-FRIDE, Brussels spoke on ‘SAARC: Lessons from the EU’. She said SAARC should learn and take lessons from the 50 years of European Union experiences but should not copy and paste its model since these two regions have entirely different history and culture. South Asia has common security threat from terrorism and other non state actors therefore all the member states in the region should collectively tackle these common concerns. It is important to bring SAARC to the level of the ordinary people by developing common institutions. These common institutions enable direct participation of the people as like European Commission and European Parliament in EU. She said there should be South Asian educational institutions and centres across the region which would educate the youth for regional cooperation and integration in the long run. Just like Europe has produced Erasmus Generation from Erasmus Mundus program, SAARC should also invest on youth through regional education system where youth from the
South Asia could understand the region in depth. The foreign Ministers and ambassadors from the respective member countries of SAARC should frequently meet in the regional and global platforms she said. She further added SAARC countries do not see themselves as belonging to SAARC abroad, for instance there is no meeting between EU and SAARC ambassadors based in Brussels. On the contrary, EU-ASEAN meetings take place frequently, which indicates the seriousness on the part of Southeast Asia.

Amb. Dr. Shambhu Ram Simkhada from Nepal spoke on 'Re-energizing SAARC Institutional Mechanisms'. Nepal has a major role to articulate message and agendas in SAARC since it enjoys the leadership and hosts the SAARC Secretariat. 18th SAARC summit brings unique combination of new and experienced leadership in South Asia which gives us hope to inject new dynamism in SAARC. This Summit can play an instrumental role in energising and restructuring institutional mechanisms. He stated that the time has come to change our mind set and it comes with the role of a visionary leadership.

Prof. B.C. Upreti, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) spoke on 'Re-shaping India’s South Asia Policy: PM Modi’s Vision of Good Neighbourly Relations'. Under the new leadership, India is trying to bring in regional synergy. For decades, India has been blamed for not having a South Asian policy. India became choosy in terms of dealing with the countries in the region. India has given more emphasis in dealing with the countries in South Asia on a bilateral basis despite the SAARC. He further said eventually it is the domestic political scenario that determines foreign policy of the country. Unless we have a strong leadership, focused government and viable economic background, it is difficult to frame a strong foreign policy. After a very long time we have a government with committed leadership and viable economic asset which eventually encourages and provides confidence to PM Modi in developing India’s vision in multiple arena of International’s politics particularly towards South Asia.

Ms. Chime Paden Wangdi, Secretary General, Tarayana Foundation, Thimpu said for peace and prosperity to prevail the first thing is to care for the basic necessities of common people. When we discuss and make the regional priorities, basic necessities like shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation etc. might not be the agendas of our discussion however fulfilling these needs of common people is essential for sustainable peace and harmony. We need to move beyond the rhetoric and actually commit to setting aside bilateral differences in the interest of taking the region forward through collaboration and meaningful engagement on all fronts she said. For collective growth and prosperity in the region we should leave our old baggage and egos outside the door and jointly discuss about tomorrow’s better future. As a region we are not doing very well on reducing poverty, even some of the member countries are graduating from the LDC status, poverty is still around in the region and we need to tackle it with collective action.

Shafqat Munir, Associate Research Fellow from BIPSS, Dhaka spoke on 'Towards Greater Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: Expectations from the 18th Summit'. He said among regional associations, SAARC was one of the first regional organizations to talk about terrorism back in 1987 by signing a convention on suppression of Terrorism. At the outset of 18th SAARC Summit it is natural to expect what SAARC can do to counter terrorism particularly when all the member countries are directly or indirectly affected by it. In order to tackle counter terrorism in South Asia we need a coordinated regional counter terrorism strategy. Similarly regional coordination and training centres is another important need of the time in the region. Greater flow of information and effective communication among the member nations is one of the primary tools to defeat terrorism. However the level of communication and
sharing of information for collective counter terrorism is poor among SAARC countries which ultimately benefit the terrorist groups to strengthen their network. He further said we can see the immense level of cooperation among the terrorist organizations but when it comes to the states there is hardly any coordination even for this collective threat.

Prof. M.P. Lohani, former Ambassador from Nepal said Dhaka Declaration (1985) is still relevant in today’s context. Launching of SAARC in 1985 was the common desire of South Asian leaders to promote the welfare of the people of in the region and to improve their quality of life. Initial years of SAARC from 1985 to 1992 is known as the first cycle of cooperation and during this period SAARC was concentrated on building the institutional infrastructures such as establishment of SAARC Secretariat and creating of regional centres. He further said that the 49th SAARC Programming Committee recently held in Kathmandu decided to close down three regional centres, namely Kathmandu based SAARC Information Centre, Islamabad based Human Resource Development Centre and New Delhi based SAARC Documentation Centre. SAARC has failed to create a tangible impact on lives of people of the region. The Secretariat has not been as effective as it should be he said and added the time has come to restructure the Secretariat.

Dr. Nihar Nayak, Associate Fellow, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, (IDSA), New Delhi spoke on ‘India and the 18th Summit: From a Reluctant member to an Active Partner’. He said in 2003 when Indian economy boomed, India started playing the role of active partner in SAARC region because of its economic interest. India wanted to use SAARC market for its economic growth. In 2003 India found it difficult to take advantage of SAARC forum to share its economic benefits with member countries because of bilateral disputes between the member states therefore India initiated the BIMSTEC. After 2007 Summit in India, it gave importance to regional connectivity in South Asia. India has become an active partner in SAARC because it felt that its passive role in the region has given space to many external actors to play active role in South Asia. He said another reason that made India an active partner is the expectations of Indian leadership from the other member countries in order to lead SAARC. India’s new leadership under PM Modi has given importance to SAARC as the neighbourhood first policy. His first foreign visit to Bhutan and then to Nepal gives message that India has significantly understood the need and importance of its neighbours.

Aparupa Bhattacherjee, Research Officer, IPCS, New Delhi spoke on ‘North-east India: Land Bridge between SAARC and ASEAN’. She said SAARC is a region that has 23% of the world population and 15% of world’s land belongs to this region. She further said lack of significant economic integration between South and South East Asian economies is one of the reasons why this region is lacking behind in global economic competition. Poor connectivity in terms of infrastructure as well as in terms of people to people relation has been playing a crucial role in pushing this region behind. To develop infrastructure connectivity between South and South East Asia it is important to consider North East of India because of its geostrategic position, she said. Correspondingly the connectivity within North East India is vital in order to connect these two different regions.
Valedictory Session
Dr. Mallika Joseph, Executive Director, RCSS, Colombo addressed the valedictory. She said SAARC was set up to the aim of fortifying cooperation between South Asian countries leading to enhance economic cooperation and prosperity. It is important to review SAARC since its birth she said and added thirty years later all the countries in the region have achieved significant economic growth. Unfortunately this is happened without the involvement of SAARC. States in South Asia have all been growing at night when SAARC has been sleeping. Holistic future growth in South Asia is possible only when SAARC wakes up and it creates opportunities for integrated economic activities. She further said South Asia’s trade within the region and external partners has increased significantly since the 1990’s but shared growth with external partners has been faster than those within the region. Shared regional economic policy framework that can facilitate the creation of regional financial and regulatory institution to enable smoother functioning of all markets factor including capital market is required she added. Poor regional connectivity and lack of infrastructure for trade is another major challenge for SAARC. The region continues to lag behind with regards to modern and efficient regional connectivity like road, rail, air, telecom and maritime infrastructure. Despite of all these, South Asia is at the cross roads of the rising Asia, making its geopolitical relevance much more significant.