

Prospects for SAARC-Japan Dialogue Partnership: A Bangladeshi Perspective

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Summary

Japan has maintained a warm bilateral relationship with each of the SAARC countries for many years. JICA's role in socioeconomic and infrastructural development has been evident across the SAARC region. Recently, Japan has renewed its economic, strategic and maritime security interests in the region especially in India, a rising global power, and Bangladesh, geo-politically a vital littoral of the Bay of Bengal. The mutual state visits of top leaders (Abe, Modi, Hasina) of Japan and South Asia in 2014 for establishing a robust partnership, current literatures on Japan-South Asia relations, official statements and editorials indicate their growing mutual interests.

Nevertheless, Japan's multilateral engagement in South Asia has not been significant. Despite being an observer of SAARC since 2005, and actively making a contribution to establish SAARC-Japan Special Fund in 1993, the current relationship between Japan and SAARC is still quite narrow. The relationship is largely knowledge based exchange programs which have been organized with the support of the fund, e.g., SAARC-Japan energy symposiums. However, Japan does not have any collaboration with SAARC for any concrete projects such as regional or sub-regional connectivity as it has remarkably been doing with ASEAN through ASEAN-Japan dialogue partnerships. It can be argued that the SAARC-Japan dialogue partnership can bring further win-win situations for both entities. At this point, questions may be raised: What are the merits of the Japan-South Asia relationship? Are there any prospects for SAARC-Japan dialogue partnership? What lessons can be learnt from ASEAN-Japan relations for SAARC-Japan?

The SAARC region has been receiving a great attention by extra regional major powers and Japan is no exception in this regard. The concept of the 'Indo-Pacific Age' linking the two great oceans is gaining traction and promotes the significance of India as well as other littorals of Bay of Bengal. The region is located at the centre of the Indian ocean, which is believed to dominate the fate of the nations in the 21st century. The ocean carries two thirds of the oil shipments of the world. The growth and even survival of some major powers largely depend on the energy passing through the ocean; almost half of Japan's energy resources comes from the Middle East through this ocean. The SAARC region lords over the ocean. Thus, it is in the interest of Japan to see a friendly and stable South Asia. Moreover, the rise of India, South Asia as a potential billion-plus market, a growing regional and sub-regional initiatives through SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA, China's keen interests and leadership role in building BCIM corridor and very recently her thrust for revival of the ancient 'Maritime Silk Route' has added further value to the weight of the SAARC region. On the other hand, the high economic growth of most of SAARC countries, and recent cooling relations between Japan and China, a prime destination for

Japanese investment, has contributed to shifts in the interests of Japanese government and the business community from China toward the SAARC region. Similarly, SAARC countries have a strong motivation to deepen closer relations with Japan, a credible partner, as they can attract greater amounts of Japanese ODA and investments for their continuing development.

From various perspectives, SAARC region has a vast potential, yet poverty and other human security concerns remain rampant, owing substantially to unresolved inter- and intra-state conflicts. Interdependence among regional countries is imperative in promoting cooperation and eventually regionalism, but unfortunately it is very low in South Asia; trade within the region is less than 5 percent even after thirty years of SAARC's existence. Hence, revitalization of SAARC is indispensable. The SAARC leaders recognized this fact at the 18th SAARC Summit in November 2014. The Modi government of India has already initiated a new SAARC diplomacy called 'SAARC Yatra' (SAARC Journey) for strengthening the forum.

Japan being a credible partner of SAARC countries can play a proactive diplomatic function both directly and behind the scenes to deepen regional cooperation in South Asia just as it played a catalyst role in magnifying ASEAN's harmony and growth. SAARC countries need to explore the ASEAN-Japan dialogue partnership mechanism. Regarding the prospects of Japan-SAARC dialogue partnership, from a pragmatic perspective, the partnership can be formed, but this depends on how the South Asian governments can make SAARC more effective, view Japan's engagement as a dialogue partner, and how proactively Japan can play its due role.

Both Japan and SAARC countries can consider the following ideas and measures: i) a conference can be organized on the significance and prospects of SAARC-Japan dialogue partnership either in Tokyo or Dhaka; ii) the capacity of the SAARC secretariat has to be strengthened, and a study can be done with the support of SAARC-Japan Special Fund; iii) with its great stature, Indian policy makers have to show visionary leadership. Their constructive neighborhood policy in SAARC region may limit any negative motive of extra-regional powers; iv) Japan has to be widely engaged itself in sub-regional cooperation to bring a momentum in connectivity in SAARC region; v) Japan can and should build more soft institutions like Japan Study Centers, or East Asian Study Centers in public or reputed private universities in South Asia, e. g., a Japan Study Center can be established in the BRAC University in Bangladesh.

Japan has never meddled in the internal affairs of SAARC countries, but rather has been a trusted friend and development partner for several years. In addition, considering Japan's tremendous experience in the development of ASEAN as a dialogue partner, Japan can be a credible dialogue partner for SAARC. Japan also has to play a pro-active role as a catalyst in strengthening the SAARC mechanism and South Asians have to be smarter to gain more by establishing an SAARC-Japan dialogue partnership.