

Report of the Conference on

**“SAARC 2015: Expanding Horizons and Forging Cooperation in a Resurgent Asia”**

**New Delhi, 09-11 February 2007.**

*The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) India and the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) jointly organised two day seminar on “SAARC 2015: Expanding Horizons and Forging Cooperation in a Resurgent Asia” at Hotel Claridges, New Delhi. The seminar deliberated extensively on evolving ways and means for South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to become an effective and powerful institution for expanding horizons and forging cooperation in a resurgent Asia in the next decade or by 2015.*

**Introduction and Background:**

Asia’s strength lies in its size and diversity. Its distinct sub-regions – East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia- are promising, vibrant and robust. They are critical to the world economy both because of their strategic locations and also the huge commands they have on vital natural resources. The four sub-regions are not uniform in terms of the levels of their development and each region therefore faces diverse challenges.

Accounting for more than 60 percent of World’s population; one-third of the world’s economy; over a quarter of international exports; and largest amount of global foreign direct investment, the Continent has become the engine for the revival of global economy with its large reservoir of entrepreneurial, technical and technological skills and abundant natural resources including oil and gas.

Asia is the largest market in the world with an increasing portion of the global workforce and a growing middle class. The rise of China and India has made a profound impact globally and particularly in rest of Asia. China is spearheading changes at a fast pace in East Asia. India is impacting on rest of SAARC, the Gulf region and to some extent on Central Asia apart from its growing ties with East Asia.

SAARC has been bogged by political problems and disputes among its member countries. It has not achieved satisfactory results within its present parameters of regional cooperation. It has also not succeeded in establishing meaningful cooperation with other regional groupings in South East Asia and Central Asia and around Gulf. Neither has SAARC been able to take advantage of synergies that can be harnessed by internal and external regional cooperation. As a result, SAARC remains marginalized at the periphery of the emerging Asian resurgence. Contrastingly, ASEAN’s pace of progress and its record of meaningful cooperation with other regional and international organizations are well known. It has emerged as a driving force for Asian resurgence as became evident at

the ASEAN plus Summit and the two East Asian Summits held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 and in Cebu, Philippines last month.

It is in this background that the conference addressed the question for SAARC in its third decade as to how to move further and make SAARC a powerful institution for regional cooperation amongst the South Asian countries and integration with other regional economic groups such as ASEAN, GCC etc.

### **The Participation:**

Prominent policy makers and researchers from different countries of Asia were invited. Rtd.Ambassador Kant K. Bhargava, who was the second Secretary-General of SAARC was the main person behind organizing the conference, and the joint organizer was Prof. Mahendra P. Lama, Chairman, Centre for South, Central, South East Asian and South West Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. There were about 50 participants invited from different countries of Asia and some delegates from EU and USA.

The Conference began with networking dinner at the venue on the 9<sup>th</sup> Feb. night hosted by Dr. Karan Singh, President Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and Chancellor, JNU.

### **The Conference:**

**February 10, 2006:** The Inaugural Session was chaired by Dr. Karan Singh and the inaugural address was given by Mr. I.K.Gujral, former Prime Minister of India.

**Session 1:** *Asian Dynamism and Challenges for Synergising Internal and External Cooperation of South Asia:* Chaired by Dr. Arjun Sengupta, Member of Parliament. The presenters were Dr. Sartaz Aziz, former Finance and Foreign Minister of Pakistan; Dr. Kamal Hossain Former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh; Dr. Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, former Foreign Minister of Nepal; and Dr. Mahmood Shaugee, Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation of Maldives. The Discussants included were Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director General of Research and Information System; Khalid Mahmood, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to China; Syed Muazzem Ali, Former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh; Prof. Mohan Rao, Director, South Asia Centre, National University of Singapore.

**Session 2:** *Perspective of relations between South Asia and other regions:* Four working groups were formed to deliberate on the theme with respect to each sub-region of Asia, i.e. South Asia and South East Asia; South Asia and East Asia; South Asia and Central Asia, South Asia and the Gulf countries; and South Asia and the European Union, South Asia and North America. In each sub-group there was one chairperson, one presenter and 4 panellists drawn from the respective sub-regions.

**February 11, 2007:**

**Session 3:** presentations to Plenary of Groups Results by Chairpersons of all 4 groups

**Session 4:** *Vision and Strategy for a Third Decade of SAARC:* Ms. Preeti Saran, Joint Secretary Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, Incharge of SAARC, Amb. Farooq Sobhan, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo were the presenters.

**Concluding Session:** SAARC 2015: chaired by Prof. B.B.Bhattacharya, Vice Chancellor, JNU. The presenter was Prof. M.P.Lama of JNU and Amb. Kant Bharagava. The session adopted a draft document on SAARC 2015.

**Highlights:**

The conference was very well attended. The participation of Indian and foreign designatories, who were closely associated with SAARC since its formation and who have been watching seriously the developments at different SAARC Summits over time, was very rewarding as they were able to tell us their experiences about regional cooperation in this troubled region of the world.

The participation was most of those who are/were working in the arena of policymaking and those who are researchers doing very serious kind of research in the area of regional cooperation. Their comments and suggestions are very relevant and practical. There was no rhetoric.

The draft document, prepared on the basis of the recommendations of various groups and the presenters and panelists, will be submitted to the 14th SAARC Summit to be held at New Delhi in April 2007 for consideration and acceptance by the Heads of States of the SAARC countries at the Summit.

It was indeed a rewarding experience as I had an opportunity to present CUTS and its activities and excellent performance over time. It is indeed satisfying that many participants both from India and Abroad know about CUTS and have very high opinion about it. Many of them regularly visit CUTS website.

I circulated the draft Advocacy document prepared by us on RECSA which was well received.

**Lowlights:**

Many of eminent persons were retired Foreign Service people who were sharing their experiences which, of course, rewarding. Only Ms. Preeti Saran, JS, SAARC, could tell us the current situation and difficulties the Association is facing. Even there was no official from the SAARC Secretariat, Katmandu.

The Pakistani delegates were not very open and could say something in terms of decorative wordings only.

**Miscellaneous:**

There was no direct invitation to CUTS but we asked for it and we got it but without any hospitality and travel reimbursement. The agenda supplied, very lately, did not mention my participation and presentation. Of late I could know that I have also to make presentation, which I did, but the whole affair was not in good taste. Next time if any invitation is received for making presentation in any seminar/conference our participation should be subject to hospitality and travel reimbursement.