Regional Conflict Transformation: A Reinterpretation of South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC)

In 1985 the seven South Asian states, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives established the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). Until now SAARC has not markedly succeeded in achieving its stated economic, political or cultural objectives. Despite its failures the member-states have never seriously questioned the justification of the Association. On the contrary, they are forcefully expanding its scope and programmes.

The majority of studies on SAARC investigate the rationale and potential of the Association from a neo-functionalist perspective. These studies focus on the intended consequences of the Association, e.g. the state of progress in the field of regional trade or in the field of political understanding. Therefore, in a situation when SAARC remains relatively ineffective in achieving its stated economic or political objectives, the neo-functionalist analyses lose their explanatory capacity concerning the present rationale and the future prospective of the Association. The fact that SAARC still exists and that the member-states are determined to continue with the Association therefore calls for a reinterpretation of SAARC beyond the neo-functionalist research paradigm.

This study interprets SAARC as a regional conflict transformation. By applying a structurational theoretical perspective it argues that SAARC, as an institution is capable of transforming the tension-ridden and conflict-prone interstate relations between India and the other South Asian states. It analyses the intended, unintended and instrumental consequences of SAARC and shows that these various consequences imply the transformation of the issues, rules and the structure of interstate relations in the region. It argues that such transformation is conducive to the mitigation of interstate tensions and conflicts in the region.

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