

Remarks on “Regional Cooperation in South Asia – a dream worth pursuing”

Dr Chaulia, Dean School of International Affairs,
Distinguished dignitaries, and colleagues, and my young friends,

Thank you for the invitation to be here today and the opportunity to be at the Jindal Global University and this Conference. I am sure it will be a great success and you will all take back something valuable from this experience. That is the strength of youth. I intend to use my limited time to speak to you on Regional Cooperation in South Asia, which I believe is a dream worth pursuing despite the gloomy scenarios that some foresee.

In the international system populated by nation states, the interactions between states can be described by three core Cs- Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict. There are more Cs which includes Confusion, (I am trying to understand its impact), and Communication (which I assume exists at in some form). The three Cs are present in a varying mix in any bilateral relationship. They are more intense when states are neighbours and are closely coupled through numerous linkages. Geography after all cannot be changed. Rational state leaders must therefore strive to maximize cooperation, engage in constructive competition, and minimize and manage conflicts. This is the case with all regions, including South Asia.

Across Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Far East, despite tensions and conflicts, the broad trend is towards stronger regional cooperation. Europe started this after the end of World War II, and today the EU will probably overcome the new challenge posed by the impending exit of a large member state. ASEAN and the African Union have also built fairly robust frameworks for cooperation. In stark contrast, our region, home to three large and powerful economies

(China, Japan and India), hard working and talented people, and with a proud civilizational history has not moved forward.

We are still prisoners of conflicts which veto progress in cooperation and healthy competition. What can we do if a country wants to hold cooperation hostage to a conflicting interest? Well then we have to move on with the other countries and hope that in the future enlightenment will prevail. It is also a great challenge to maintain cooperation in the face of the deliberate destructive use of terrorism by official agencies of any state. Such a state cannot be taken seriously. It will pay the price for creating and sustaining a monster.

But there are some rays of hope. In the modern era, the rise of democracy and articulation of people's desires has made the old nation state less powerful. Modern technology has vastly increased the voice of the people and leaders have to pay heed. Autocratic regimes can buy legitimacy by offering growth, but only for a limited time. There is growing clamour among the people of our region for stronger and more meaningful regional cooperation across national boundaries. In the internet age people can communicate across such lines with ease.

Time is short so I will focus on the potential for building regional cooperation in some areas. The scope is vast and the promise of win-win outcomes is there to be realized.

Firstly Health – we must cooperate in monitoring and controlling outbreaks of diseases old and new. Together we can do this much more effectively and at lower cost than separately. We can also extend advanced medical treatment across borders, by direct movement of patients as well as through telemedicine linkages between hospitals. In primary and universal health care, we can benefit from the experience of countries such as Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Thailand, which have achieved good results. Nobody should be too proud to learn.

Next- Environment – we can and should cooperate in monitoring and reducing air pollution which goes across national boundaries and

directly affects the health of our people. Pollutant particles of micron size can travel in the air for hundreds of kilometers delivering their deadly cargo into the lungs of our children and seniors. The next few months in Delhi will drive home this point. Why is there no regional project to fight this menace? Water quality in rivers and ground sources has deteriorated. We can work together to find durable solutions to this problem so that our people can at least drink and cook with safe water.

Next- Disaster management – cooperation is essential. Even large countries cannot go it alone. Joint disaster management framework will cut costs and reduce the requirement of emergency equipment, supplies and personnel for fighting disasters. In the last months during the unprecedented floods in Kerala, help poured in from all over the country. We must do this on a regional scale. Disasters are certain to increase in frequency and intensity due to global warming and we must be well prepared.

Next- Energy –here cooperation through electrical grids and gas pipelines can be of great help. Temporary shortages in one area can be met by borrowing energy from a surplus area. The whole system becomes more economical and effective when scaled up to a regional level. We know this from our own experience in a large country. Gas and oil pipelines such as TAPI and IPI have been discussed but many obstacles remain. The European example of the Energy Charter Treaty and its later non-binding versions should be emulated. These provide a sound legal framework for resolving differences between and protecting the interests of energy producing, consuming and transit countries, as well as private investors. They also ensure security and stability of energy supply and fulfillment of contracts. Based on this experience a South Asian Energy Charter can be worked out. But unfortunately, with a few exceptions, our policy makers are not aware of these energy related developments in Europe.

Next – Transport – we need near seamless transport by road and rail across our region. The resulting greater movement of people, goods across national boundaries will have a strong positive impact on trade,

and tourism, and create jobs and growth at the border regions. The border crossing points need to have more capacity and be better managed to handle increasing traffic. Transit countries can earn revenue from transit fees, and landlocked states can get access to the sea.

Next – ICT – we can improve connectivity across our region through terrestrial and satellite means, and opens the doors to cross border use for activities such as tele-education, entertainment industry products, scientific research, etc. Using ICT we can improve our education experience at all levels, improve governance and service delivery, and release the creative energy of our youth. The impact of social media is already great, and we can foresee it building linkages between people across our region. We have so much to share by way of culture- from food, clothing, art forms such as cinema, theatre, and music. ICT and social media will reinforce the trend to a sense of South Asian identity

Next- Research and Education- Our research capability will be amplified through collaboration between our research institutions and universities. Mobility of researchers, faculty and students is a powerful stimulant. Look at Europe as it advances towards its goal of a single European Educational Area and a single European Research Area. We are not even near this even in our country, let alone the region. So there is vast scope to move ahead.

Next – Marine Ecosystems – The Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal are two of the large marine ecosystems identified under the GEF programme. These two systems are at high risk of depletion of marine living resources, threatening the livelihood and food of millions of our coastal populations. There is no integrated management of these two ecosystems by the concerned coastal states, unlike other ecosystems such as the Gulf of Guinea, etc. In our case we have not even begun to discuss about how to manage our two large marine ecosystems. Pressure is building up as negotiations for a High Seas Treaty move ahead, pushed by global concern over the deteriorating marine environment. Soon it might be too late if the coastal states in our region do not shoulder their responsibility.

Next – Democracy building and strengthening – No democracy is perfect; all have flaws which need fixing. But the democratic deficit is much less than in the case of an authoritarian regime. Those of us who live in a democratic state must not take it for granted. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. We must continue the struggle to make our elections clean and fair; our political parties managed with transparency and accountability, constructive debate over real issues, better participation of women, and strengthen participation of the population in all processes in democracy. We can share experiences and best practices across our countries in all these fields.

Next- Media independence – Journalists in some of our countries face threats professional as well as personal. A strong and independent media is essential for a democratic system and this is the reason enemies of democracy seek to demolish it. We have some South Asian associations of media persons such as SAJA which have tried to protect journalists. The other problem is the control over media by those who own it, in the absence of a good regulatory framework. Even the advanced countries suffer from this problem. But that does not mean we should not work for change.

I could go on many other such topics, such as atomic energy, outer space, meteorology, food security, etc. but my time is limited. Let me reiterate that Regional Cooperation in our region is definitely worth pursuing, despite its difficulties. Look at the EU with 28 countries. Every issue is discussed in great details and progress can sometimes seem painfully slow and bureaucratic. But this is how negotiators of different countries get to know and understand each other and build bridges between their countries. In the end that counts for great deal, and the emergence of a shared sense of European identity, and everyone gains.

As we move from 2 states to 3 and 4 in a system, the number of possible interactions grows rapidly from 1 to 7 to 14. You can count this as an exercise, adding up the possible 1-1, 1-2, 2-2, 1-3. etc. interactions. The

number goes up rapidly with the number of players. This illustrates the complexity involved in the process. Most of the time this complexity is managed through meetings of the parties and one can see the dynamics at work. It is not necessarily true that a few players can dominate the process and make it easy— the others tend to gang up to prevent this. To work, all the players must perceive significant benefits in moving on from the status quo. In the case of neighbours there will also be the complications due to domestic political players and stakeholders on the boundaries between states. Also there may be differences between perception and reality, and between negotiators and stakeholders.

Now in any regional cooperation framework, there are some countries that want to move faster while others move more slowly. Some may not move at all or even block or sabotage the process. So how do we deal with this? Germany and France together with Spain and Italy in the EU have come up with a sensible idea. It has been called “Multi Speed Europe”, or Variable Geometry Europe to use an analogy with the variable geometry aircraft that can fly at different speeds. Those countries which want to work together and reach an agreement can do so, while others can stay out if they choose. But everyone cannot be held prisoner of one dissenter. We already have several frameworks that cover less than the full EU – the Euro zone, the Schengen Area, etc are well known examples. Of course it is best to get to an agreement with the largest number of countries, but sometimes the path to this goal is slower. Our region can learn from the European experience as well as the experience of ASEAN.

I hope you will be stimulated to let your imagination run free to envisage many other promising avenues for building regional cooperation. The energy and commitment of our youth is a powerful force. Once again, my sincere thanks to the organizers of this conference and my best wishes for its success.

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