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Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating cooperation, institutional structures

Chan, Jia Hao

National University of Singapore

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BOOK REVIEW - Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating cooperation, institutional structures by Kishore C. Dash

Given recent tremendous attention and academic literature on the failures of regional cooperation in South Asia, it remains scarce to find a comprehensive multi-disciplinary and multi-level based analysis on SAARC's failure as what Kishore has done in this book. Rather than discussing the usual cross-regional comparative studies between SAARC and ASEAN or the European Union, the book dwells directly into differentiating various theoretical approaches for regionalization across the world first, in order to put across the argument that motivations of South Asia's regionalism is non-universal and unique from Euro-centric perspectives; transactionalism, functionalism, neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism, appears to be weak in this book for analysing regionalism issues in South Asia's context. With this as pretext in Chapter 1, the book then continues throughout the next seven chapters, to provide historical background, factors that help and hinder the development of SAARC and in-depth analysis of interplay between SAARC regional cooperation against various domestic politics and preferences across South Asian nations.

In contrast to Chapter 1's dismissal of theoretical approaches to regional integration, Kishore in Chapter 2 establishes and highlights the two-level game framework¹ that he will be using to analyse the role domestic politics play in South Asia's regional cooperation beyond merely looking at international level. Here, **(1) domestic political institutions, (2) strength of governments and (3) preferences of societal actors** are independent variables specifically discussed in depth for SAARC's failure. But while they are able to smoothly and directly continue in Chapter 5, 6 and 7, there are missed opportunities in discussing a number of issues that would hinder a more robust study and recommendation on cooperation in the rest of this book. For one, the convergence/divergence of political systems across South Asian nations that can affect the stability and consistency of **(1) and (2)** appears to be lacking. This could have been developed and linked to Chapter 6 where a discourse surfaces on how nature of liberalizing/nationalist coalitions and potential market gains can affect economic liberalization in terms of FTAs (p.166). Furthermore, here there is an under-assumption of domestic societal actors' in **(3)** as being domestic in nature which inevitably sees detailed nation-based analysis later in Chapter 7 (p.174) failing to discuss transnational networks across these non-government actors; for instance, scholars and business executives that have links with two or more South Asian countries. But the most regretful of these, is for Kishore not to have shown readers if

¹ This refers to the national and international level.

potential gains and existing transnational interactions² among domestic elites can foster for the region's economic development, given that he did mention the term 'South Asian elites' in Chapter 7 (p.185). Hence, readers may ponder if the domestic elite families and networks, as a result of historical events such as before the Pakistan-Bangladesh split, are really as indifferent as what Kishore claims to be.³ The afore mentioned gaps could have derived from Kishore's implementation of the two-level game framework from the beginning, therefore locking him out of opportunities to work on a grey-area that overlaps national and international actors and affairs in the region.^{#4}

Chapter 3 then proceeds to discuss shared differences and characteristics across South Asian nations, the geographical and historical influences that shaped the region's dynamic and conflicts. Here, five nations among the eight in SAARC are specifically discussed here, namely Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for their relations with their neighbours. Nonetheless, disappointingly we see the same old discourse played in the book as with other South Asian literature - that each of the nations' inevitably, 'bandwagons' or defies India as a result of geographical proximities, historical interactions and local domestic pressures. Other inter-national interactions such as Bangladesh-Nepal relations and Pakistan-Bangladesh relations⁵, are clearly lacking for readers to look beyond the India's regional hegemony as the main hindrance for the region's cooperation. Neither does Kishore include sub-regional cooperation like the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) established in 2001 comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka here, that could also be significantly explored beyond SAPTA and SAFTA later in Chapter 6 (p. 159-165).

By this juncture (Chapter 3), readers would also have realised that the Pakistan-India is what Kishore purports as the most serious international strained relationship affecting the region as a result of both geography and historical events - through significantly raising the issue of Kashmir dispute (p.59) and Indo-Pakistan War (p.62).⁶ Shockingly however, the book offers no

² Here we reasonably assume that elites from Pakistan and India have minimal contact with one another as a result of Pakistan-India rivalry.

³ In addition, I wish to criticize that Kishore's own methodology in exploring the elites' attitudes towards regional cooperation in South Asia appears to be too region based. This tells us very little, for instance, if an elite from Bangladesh is concerned with intra-regional interactions because he/she may only be concerned with dealings from India, perhaps not so much on Maldives or Sri Lanka.

⁴ In this book, Chapter 2 continues with Chapter 5, 6, 7.

⁵ There is only a brief mention of Bangladesh-Pakistan relation in p. 68.

⁶ This is despite the fact that the book has been published in 2008 and is unable to cover recent events like the

interesting explorations on other nations' stances towards Pakistan in this context that could have actually raised a stronger case for Kishore's emphasis for SAARC to 'finding a political solution to Kashmir dispute' (p. 202).

Similarly, external powers and interventions to smaller South Asian states (p.77) unfortunately plays a small role in this book⁷ given the current growing foreign attention towards the region such as China's One-Belt One-Road, and Pakistan and India's aided entrance into Shanghai Cooperation Organization; although Kishore did briefly discussed about Pakistan's external intervention from China (p.59) and US sponsored organizations later in Chapter 5 (p.114). Chapter 4 which deals with the 'Origins and evolution of SAARC' could have dwelled deeper on the influences of 'international factors' (p.85). As a result, Kishore only mentioned the importance of building up foreign affairs⁸ in his concluding chapter while leaving readers without concrete recommendations because he could not refer to his limited discussion on foreign affairs throughout the entire book.

Nonetheless, many of SAARC's challenges in this book can draw inter-connection that provides comprehensive insights with combined theory and evidence. For instance, Kishore incorporation of 'ethnic politics' (p.120) links with the non-banwagoning of smaller South Asia towards India (p.117). 'Balance of power' in Chapter 5 (p.115) complements with Chapter 4's discourse on Pakistan-India's initial strong reluctance for regional cooperation (p.86) and their nuclear issues (p.133). Yet, the entire book is consistently disorganized and jumbled around with observable overlaps; the repetition of the three variables found in Chapter 2, were also clearly found in Chapter 5, 6 and 7.

In conclusion, as much as I would like to criticize this book as primarily theoretical, evidential but lacking novelty, I appreciate Kishore's vast knowledge on the historical aspects of South Asian nations; which in fact in my opinion is the biggest strength of the book. Academics thus should not expect Kishore's work to be solution-based and revolutionary, although the book is sufficiently informative to understand SAARC and its challenges and as a textbook material for South Asian studies.

cancellation of 19th SAARC Submit

⁷ Here we do not deny the fact that Kishore did state that all SAARC member countries except Bhutan and Maldives have sought external assistance in order to restrict India's hegemonic power. He also gave example Bangladesh seeking help from the U.S and United Nations (p.116). However beyond this we do not find more in detail.

⁸Lesson 5: building the support of the quartet – the United States, Europe, Japan, and Russia – for South Asian regionalism.

Lesson 6: encouraging China's active involvement