

Introducing the Baltic Sea Region to South Asia



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Abstract

This paper has primarily three purposes: To provide a brief introduction of the Baltic Sea Region, in terms of its history, identity, culture, politics and economy; to make a comparative study between the Baltic Sea Region and the South Asian region, particularly the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and to examine if there is any possibility of the South Asian region to grow on the lines of the Baltic Sea region.

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I. Introduction

On 9th November 1989, history was created. Jubilant East German demonstrators stormed the Berlin Wall and started to dismantle what had become the chief symbol of the Cold War era. It marked the birth of a new era in world politics and the formal end of the superpower era characterized by East-West rivalry that had extended across the entire globe. Subsequently, as communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, and Soviet power was on the retreat both domestically and internationally, 'one world' speaking with 'one voice' appeared to have come into existence. It was in this context that a new region emerged significantly in the limelight of European politics and cultural cooperation. And this region was none other than what is called the Baltic Sea Region today.

Comprising mainly the northern and eastern parts of existing Europe, the Baltic Sea Region is most frequently seen as a region made up by ten countries; the four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway; three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; three large countries with only a minor part belonging to the geographical Baltic Sea rim: Germany, Poland and Russia. Of these countries, eight are EU members while Norway and Russia are EU associated non-members. Linguistically, the region is rather diverse – consisting of Baltic, Finno-Ugric, Germanic and Slavic languages. Ideologically, it is shaped by security and environmental concerns and, historically, this region is shaped by a history of trade, wars and conquest.

This paper has primarily three purposes:

- to provide a brief introduction of the Baltic Sea Region, in terms of its history, identity, culture, politics and economy,
- to make a comparative study between the Baltic Sea Region and the South Asian region, particularly the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and

- to examine if there is any possibility of the South Asian region to grow on the lines of the Baltic Sea Region.

II. Background: Regional Integration and Identity Formation in the Baltic Sea Region

Though the Baltic Sea Region had always existed geographically, it was, in the words of Marko Lehti, "re-invented in the late 1980s as a part of the collapse of the old bipolar world in the European North" (Lehti 2005, 9). It must be remembered that during the Cold War era, this region was perceived as a "geopolitically frozen area clearly divided between two military, ideological and economic blocs (Musial 2002, 188). The Baltic Sea was often referred to as 'the sea of peace', implying that it was a hard security zone.

However, the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 introduced various important changes at the political, economic and cultural levels. The new political situation enabled some countries to regain their independence, and made others to redefine the old doctrines and world views. Gradually this region became very attractive to economists, policy makers, politicians, and academics. Moreover, local actors became actively involved in reconstructing the social, political and economic structures of this region. Efforts were taken to bridge the economic and social divide which resulted from nearly fifty years of East-West confrontation. Cooperation in the realm of politics, culture, economy, environment, civil society networking etc. was encouraged and gradually institutionalised. This was no mean achievement, primarily because in the tumultuous years of the Cold War period, it was impossible to even imagine a united regional entity stretching across the Iron Curtain.

This process was accompanied by an attempt at creating a common Baltic Sea identity. The formation of a regional identity is complex and a

continuous process of becoming. The Baltic Sea Region is no exception to this. Historically, the region was a witness to wars, conquests and trade, which did not sufficiently contribute towards the formation of a common identity in the region. Conscious attempts at identity construction and region building had already started in the 1980s. This became evident in the speeches of politicians and academics who, in order to escape marginality and arrest the disintegrating East, tried to promote this region actively into the limelight of European politics. In this construction of identity, the past played an important role. Selected portions of cooperation in the ancient past, in the form of trade relation or political domination in the pre-nation state era, provided a good foundation for this 'newly' projected regionalism. Historical constructs like the Hanseatic League¹, or Pomor², the geopolitical figure of *Dominium Maris Baltici*³ and others were very useful in this case. The images of Hansa were found especially suitable for defining a functional region based on historical identity. "For Germans, towns like Tallinn, Riga or Danzig were no longer grey Soviet or Communist cities but their past as Hanseatic towns was revealed and cherished as a symbol of linkage" (Lehti 2005, 31). References to the narrative of the New Hansa coined in 1988 by the former Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein, Björn Engholm, were specifically used for the same purpose. The common and unifying elements of history were consciously highlighted in order to create a collective sense of belonging.

In the 1990s again, the region became defined in terms of new paradigms and categories. Scandinavian scholars, for instance, preferred imagining the future cooperation across the Baltic Sea within the framework tried out among the Nordic countries. Region building on environmental and

1 The word 'hanse' is of ancient German origin, meaning a band or a host. It was used in the twelfth century to denote merchants trading outside their native land. The Hanseatic League was an association formed by merchants who traded with Gotland.

2 Pomor refers to a trade network between Russian and Norwegian merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

3 The main objective for the great powers of the Baltic Sea had through the centuries been to create a *Dominium Maris Baltici*. It meant to create and maintain a command over the Baltic Sea and thus over most of the Baltic region. This *Dominium Maris Baltici* kept changing through the centuries.

ecological issues, improving frameworks for building a market economy in the transition countries, ensuring better transport infrastructure, balancing social and economic differences, supporting small and medium sized enterprises and promoting the cultural and economic exchange of ideas within the region became the new ideology. A gradual process of increasing cooperation among various institutions began. This was especially the case in the cultural and environmental fields, however, in the early 1990s, this movement also reached the political level. A multi cooperative pattern emerged at the trans-regional and intergovernmental levels which was used by both public and private actors. NGOs, however, were the first to establish networks; it was only later that governmental institutions began to participate.

III. Political Institutions and Civil Society Initiatives in Region-Building

Political institutions play an important role in region-building. The changed political situation in Eastern Europe after 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a series of political repercussions at various levels. A new movement under the banner 'back to Europe' was initiated. At the transatlantic level, this concluded most importantly in NATO membership. At the European level, this concluded most importantly in EU membership, which generated further institutional rearrangements at the national parliamentary level in the new member states (Jakobsen 2005). Generally, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Eastern enlargement of the EU must be seen as a key factor in the development of the Baltic Sea Region. The formulations of specific criteria for accession to the EU, together with the so-called conditionality policy had a significant impact on the political and economic reforms in the applicant countries and on nation-building and state-formation processes.

The first successful initiative taken to bridge the East-West divide became institutionalised in the form of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). This organisation soon became responsible for implementation of democratic values in the region. Also, cooperation on the lines of security became the chief concern of the CBSS. The inclusion of Russia as an equal partner in the CBSS also had important implications in terms of identity-building. In the Baltic Sea Region, the Nordic countries together with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania engaged Russia in mutually beneficial regional cooperation in order to achieve positive interdependence, which will make conflicts (including war) impossible or at least costly in the future. The role played by Russia in the CBSS represented an exception in the context of the wider post-Cold War relationship between Russia and EU-Europe (Catellani 2003, 20).

The end of the Cold War also introduced a redefinition of the security agenda within the political and academic discourse of the region. The new agenda associated with the concept of soft security opened up the traditional military security debate to a wider framework and conception of security (Tassinari and Williams 2003, 29). Central to this was a move away from state-centred thinking and increasing consideration of other issues such as environmental threats, and social, political, and economic risks as equally important for stabilising the regional security agenda. This has led to a newly emerging concept called 'soft security' cooperation, which has helped in re-defining the political space of the Baltic Sea Region into an area of intense cooperation, characterised by a mosaic of overlapping institutions, where regional and sub-regional integration is fostering peaceful relations and stability, marking a remarkable shift from 'hard security' to 'soft security'.

This has brought forward a multiplicity of actors into the forefront including governments and sub-national actors, supranational and transnational institutions, NGOs and political movements, politicians and

academics, municipalities, interest groups etc. It must also be noted that civil society agencies have been playing an important role in trans-national networking within the Baltic Sea Region. The principal interests of these networks include youth affairs, environmental protection, trade and industry, and to some extent cultural exchange and the arts (Schymik 2003, 233). However, problems relating to minority issues, migrants, refugees, human rights violation etc. have not been adequately addressed by these organisations.

The Baltic Sea soft security regional cooperation demonstrates the adaptability of what may be termed as 'new regionalism'. By definition, new regionalism opens up for a more pragmatic and future oriented vision of a community based on increased networking within a policy-based regional community. While old regionalism would be mainly realised through institutions at an international level, propagating a top-down pattern of region-building, new regionalism consisted of a multidimensional form of integration, which included economic, political, social and cultural aspects, being promoted 'from below' by a large number of different types of institutions, organisations and movements. "They had very different aims, were interested in very different parts of the region, and meant different things by the region, but they all found it useful to launch their activities under the slogan of the Baltic Sea Region. Thereby the region became self-reinforcing" (Weaver 1997, 305).

IV. Trade and Economy

The enlargement of EU in May 2004 – the EU eastward (fifth) enlargement – marked a milestone in fifty years of European integration processes, which created new opportunities and challenges for economic transformation and integration of the Baltic Sea Region nations. Besides the diversity in the levels of economic development and political background among the new (by a majority post-socialist) and old member

states, the eastward enlargement of the EU is characterised by growing expectations of a properly functioning single market, and increasing pressures from globalisation processes and fast technological and knowledge-based development. The thrust is on creating new core zones and potential growth areas that support integration of the post-socialist countries in Europe's new economic and political system.

The Baltic Sea Region is now becoming one of Europe's potential growth areas having a good economic growth rate and playing an important role in European eastward integration. The economic integration of the Baltic Sea Region is based on geographical, historical and cultural factors and the feeling of a Baltic Sea identity. It is also important to note here that from the economic point of view this region displays extreme disparities. While countries like Germany, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway are quite well developed, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia are relatively poor. Traditionally successful regional integration takes place between the countries that are at the same economic level and have a similar political and institutional framework. In that sense the integration process in the Baltic Sea Region countries has been exceptional. The EU enlargement in eastern Europe has helped both the developed countries in penetrating new markets and developing economic cooperation with Russia, and the newly independent states in getting enormous foreign direct investment from the capital abundant countries, improving their business climate and developing human capital. Several organisations and institutions like the Union of the Baltic Cities (1991), Baltic Assembly (1991), Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS, 1992) or the Baltic Rim Regional Agenda (from 2001) have been established and various cooperation programmes elaborated during the last decade, furthering economic development and convergence processes of the Baltic Sea Region countries.

V. Regional Organisation Today

An analysis of the Baltic Sea Region reveals how rapidly and successfully this region has transformed itself from being a mere neutral inactive and frozen zone in the Cold War years to that of a politically and economically vibrant region today. Despite extreme disparities in terms of culture, history, language, economy, and political systems the region has thrived through the active cooperation of its member countries on the basis of a totally imagined identity of the region. It speaks volumes of how regional cooperation between totally dissimilar states can lead to the development of a region in the age of globalisation.

Regional economic integration has been adopted today as a policy in different parts of the world to respond to the challenge of globalisation. The emergence of regional trade blocs like EU, NAFTA, ASEAN etc. have resulted in the strengthening and enhancement of economic and trade relations between the countries in particular, and the world at large. In fact, in the context of the segmentation of the world trading system, regionalism has emerged as the last resort to escape marginalisation and develop collective leverages in global negotiations. Hence, many smaller nations are heading towards forming into groups. However, South Asian nations are new entrants in the international trade scenario and are trying to form themselves into a fully-fledged region.

VI. Regional Integration in South Asia: SAARC

It is my contention that the South Asian region has much to learn from the Baltic Sea Region success story. South Asia is one of the few regions in the world today without an effective economic grouping. Although an attempt at regional integration was made in mid 1980s with the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), it could not realise the goal of establishing a strong regional

economic zone in this area. Almost all the South Asian countries comprising India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives are members of the SAARC. The emergence of SAARC in 1985 coincided with the winds of economic liberalisation blowing over the Indian subcontinent. Sri Lanka liberalised its economy in 1977, partial liberalisation of the Indian economy began in 1985, and the late 1980s saw the initiation of economic liberalisation in both Bangladesh (1987) and Pakistan (1988). With open economies in four major SAARC countries, there was a need to explore the benefits of economic cooperation. The early 1990s also witnessed the end of the Cold War, and globalisation of trade and investment began taking place. It is interesting to note that it was approximately around the same time that the Baltic Sea Region states were also undergoing major economic and political transformations.

In the economic area, the SAARC made some achievements in the framework of SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), and work is continuously progressing towards a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). However, despite consistent attempts, it still could not take an effective shape as a regional trade body primarily due to political problems between Pakistan and India that hamper the regional interests. Signing of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) at the Twelfth SAARC summit in January 2004 visualised a graded reduction in import tariffs over the next decade. It also suggested a number of measures that a member may adopt, including the removal of barriers to the intra-SAARC investment, harmonisation of customs facilities, transit facilities for efficient intra-SAARC trade and simplification of procedures for business visas. The establishment of the SAFTA would, over the next decade, sharply boost economic cooperation between the countries of the region, primarily India and Pakistan. This in turn would lead to closer people-to-people contact and create a network of friendly relationships in which the Kashmir issue can be meaningfully addressed. But the SAFTA is not enough. The vision should be broadened even further to establish a

regional integration on the lines of the Baltic Sea Region or more generally the European Union, that would include abolition of trade and travel restrictions, launch a common currency and elect a supranational parliament.

It is interesting to note that South Asia is similar to the Baltic Sea Region in terms of its diversity in cultures, languages, economies and even political systems. Even within the member states, there are wide disparities in terms of economy, culture, religion and ethnicity. The region is essentially multilingual, multi-religious and multicultural just like the Baltic Sea Region, in the truest sense of the terms. However, compared to the rest of the world, the South Asian countries remain in unacceptable levels of poverty, human deprivations, population pressure and environmental degradation. Although there is an immense prospect for growth in the region, the South Asian countries have yet to seriously exploit the potentials inherent in the regional cooperation for mitigating these evils.

VII. Scope For Regional Integration in South Asia

The South Asian countries have a number of inherent advantages in regional cooperation. Perhaps the largest asset of this region is its huge human resource, which is incomparable with any other part of the world. Together, the South Asian countries command a huge potential market with their combined population of more than 1.5 billion people. What is needed is to enlarge, integrate and unify this market by removing barriers to trade and take other measures for regional cooperation. By working together, the countries of South Asia may propel their ongoing trade reforms in a coordinated fashion. Using the lowest tariffs among the member countries as the basis for coordination, they could create more trade and systematically attract FDI to the region. Efforts could also be directed to adopt strategies like place marketing or branding to enhance

economic cooperation in the region. The Øresund region in the Baltic Sea Region, which has been carved out of certain parts of Danish- Swedish territories, is a classic illustration of cross-border initiatives in region building. Here the local authorities have promoted the region as 'Øresund – The Human Capital' and concentrated their resources in adopting place marketing or branding, making it one of the most thriving economic regions in the Baltic today.

It must also be noted here that India, which is one of the most important countries in this region, has established herself in the global market as a prominent player. She is currently witnessing a growth rate of more than 8% and has been attracting huge FDI inflows over the past few years. Indian names like Lakshmi Mittal (steel tycoon), Ratan Birla and the Ambanis have arrived in the international market. India is also witnessing tremendous collaboration with the western world in areas of software and digital engineering, medicine and engineering. Moreover, cultural cooperation has also gained prominence through innovative educational exchange programmes, music and dance concerts, theatre and film festivals etc. Under such circumstances, the South Asian region should fully utilise this international exposure and platform to grow as a regional organisation.

VIII. Challenges to SAARC

It is unfortunate that the SAARC has not yielded many impressive results in the global context. There are a plethora of impediments to successful cooperation in the SAARC. Although the SAARC is today involved in multifarious area of activities, its approach towards regional cooperation has been compartmental rather than holistic, and lacks a long term planning. As a result, despite significant success registered by the SAARC over the years it has yet to meet the rising expectations of the peoples of the region. South Asia today presents a mixed picture of conflict and

cooperation. SAARC has not yet succeeded in addressing itself successfully to meet the challenges of policy formulation and implementation without which the objectives of SAARC Charter will not be achieved. On several key issues, the Member States of SAARC have diametrically opposite foreign and security policies. Two of the SAARC members, India and Pakistan, are nuclear states with perceptions of threats from each other. However, on several issues relating to social development and international economic cooperation SAARC countries have common interests and have not hesitated to articulate these, often through joint initiatives.

There are a number of daunting challenges that must be met in order to promote region-building in this region. The first is to maintain the momentum in improving the bilateral political relations between India and Pakistan. Though some attempts have been made in this regard, like the Delhi-Lahore bus service, student exchange programmes, cross-border musical concerts, medical exchanges, etc., we still have a long way to go. The second is to address economic insecurity among the smaller countries of South Asia. This necessitates making unilateral trade concessions of some substance. Since inception, SAARC intra-trade remained at a low of mere 3% and it still remains small, the reason being the existence of high nominal tariffs on a variety of non-tariff barriers such as quantitative restrictions, fiscal charges and discriminatory practices and outright ban on imports. The third challenge is to create the basic economic infrastructure required to handle higher volumes of trade. Finally, the fears of specific sectors in each country – for example, tea in India, textile in Bangladesh, and light engineering in Pakistan – that they have more to lose than to gain from the SAFTA can be assuaged only with a more gradual reduction of tariffs on “sensitive” products (Kumar and Trivedi 2004, 10- 12).

It is also important that the SAARC deals with the world's major trading blocs as a composite unit in order to maximise the gains of trade for both sides. Although the intra trade is not impressive, the South Asian nations have been maintaining strong links with the outside world, in particular with the advanced countries. The trade integration of these nations with the world is increasing at a faster rate. They have been mainly trading with the world's five major regions: North America, the European Union, Australia, East Asia and the Middle East. Europe is the South Asian countries' most important trading partner and a major export market.

IX. Civil Society and Transnational Networking

Institutions of the Baltic Sea Region have adopted various measures to bring the region closer to its citizens by increasing openness in their proceedings. Moreover, civil society networking as discussed previously has been playing a major role in region-building on various issues. In the case of SAARC, the non-governmental organisations do play a role, which has even been recognised at the highest level. Two important bodies, which already enjoy official recognition, are SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), and SAARC Law. There are some others like the Coalition For Action On South Asian Cooperation (CASAC). The SAARC Documentation Centre was established in India with a view to facilitate the availability of scientific and technical information to scholars. However, there ought to be much greater interaction between the civil society and the political class across the different countries of South Asia. This would contribute significantly towards a greater South Asian solidarity which is essential for the progress and prosperity of the people of this region.

While the Baltic Sea Region has developed successful transnational networks for coordinating activities in the fields of environment, transport, trade and industry, cultural exchange, minority rights etc., there are no similar parallels in the South Asian region. While some cooperation is

taking place in the framework of technical committees dealing with transport, telecommunication and environmental matters, there are no trans-South Asian networks in these important areas. The important subject of energy is yet to be addressed seriously in a regional context in South Asia. There is no serious cooperation on grounds of environmental issues in South Asia, despite extensive pollution in the region. Though there is an organisation called the South Asian Cooperative Environmental Programme (SACEP), which is based in Colombo, it is not very active.

X. Human Rights

Human rights issues have not found a prominent place in the deliberations of SAARC. This problem needs to be particularly addressed in a region marred by a multitude of human rights violation cases. In this regard it is similar to the Baltic Sea Region which has also not been a great champion of civic and human rights. However, there is a SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and some SAARC countries have set up Human Rights Commissions (Bhargava 1998). There are some groups of SAARC activists who deliberate from time to time on issues related to Human Rights.

XI. SAARC and the Baltic Sea Region: Areas of Cooperation

Owing to its immense population and rising middle class sector, South Asia provides an excellent opportunity for cooperation with the Baltic Sea Region in various fields. There is great potential in South Asia for trade in services such as engineering services, software, banking, education and medical services. Cooperation in the fields of science and technology, rural development, telecommunication and postal services, tourism, transport, education, fighting natural disasters, developing agriculture, energy, environment, food aid, health, and improving the conditions of the physically challenged, etc., can be extensively worked on. Specific areas

where there seems to be good scope for cooperation are digital information and software, biotechnology, genetic engineering, medicine, etc. The cooperation in science and technology has great potential, particularly because South Asia has a well developed and large scientific and technological community. Both Europe and South Asia, being deficient in energy, can cooperate by exploiting the resources of South Asia; i.e. coal resources of India, natural gas reserves of Bangladesh and Pakistan and the hydroelectric potential of the Himalayan states. Also, the Baltic Sea Region and South Asia can be important partners in what would perhaps be a much bigger grouping of countries involved in the production and transmission of energy from Central Asia.

Lessons from the Baltic Sea Region prove the fact that the growth of a region is essentially based on its ability to overcome the existing historical and political problems and to promote trade and economic cooperation. In today's increasingly competitive post-Cold War era, the economic prosperity and global image of a nation is dependant on its ability to successfully integrate with other economies. The South Asian region is no exception to the same. In order to become significant global players, the countries of this region have to reach out and start thinking in terms of growing collaboration with newly emerging entities like the Baltic Sea Region in the world.

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