

# South Asian leaders meet under shadow of intensifying tensions

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The political leaders of eight South Asian nations—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal, the Maldives and Bhutan—met last weekend at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. While there were handshakes and smiles for the cameras, the formal declaration could not obscure the lack of cooperation to resolve sharpening tensions involving India, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the renewed communal civil war in Sri Lanka and the deepening social and economic crisis facing all countries.

The gathering took place amid the largest-ever security operation in Colombo. The Sri Lankan government deployed more than 19,000 troops and policemen into the city, declared large areas as high security zones and thus out of bounds for ordinary people, and arrested dozens of Tamils in dragnet cordon-and-search operations.

The Indian navy stationed two warships in waters off Colombo equipped with Sea King helicopters and hundreds of elite troops. The Indian media reported that military bases along the coast in Tamil Nadu were placed on high alert. Like the Sri Lankan government, New Delhi justified the deployment as necessary to prevent a terrorist attack by separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas. But the extraordinary measures were also a show of force to demonstrate India's military might in the region.

At the summit, the fight against the “terrorist menace” was declared to be the number one task. The joint statement called for all countries to legislate against terrorism under their criminal law and to call on the UN to expedite a proposed “international charter against terrorism”.

The focus on the bogus “war on terrorism” provided a boost in particular to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, who has plunged the island back to war with the LTTE since 2006. On the pretext of “fighting terrorism,” the Rajapakse government is responsible for gross abuses of democratic rights, including arbitrary detentions and the operation of military-backed death squads that have disappeared or killed hundreds of people. None of the political leaders criticised these violations, let alone the resumption of communal war.

Likewise no opposition was voiced to the US-led neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. Instead, Afghanistan

President Hamid Karzai who heads the US puppet regime in Kabul, was welcomed to the meeting as a legitimate political representative. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh joined Karzai in using the opportunity to continue putting pressure on Pakistan to do more to halt the infiltration of anti-US insurgents into Afghanistan from Pakistan's border areas—all under the banner of the “war on terror”.

India has repeatedly accused Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), of masterminding the July 7 attack on its embassy in Kabul that killed 54 people including the Indian defence attaché. Pakistan has denied it. Adding fuel to fire, US intelligence officials last week claimed that the attack on the Indian embassy was carried out by the Taliban with help of ISI members.

Clashes erupted between Indian and Pakistan armies along the Line of Control in the divided Kashmir on July 28 for the third time in one week, killing one Indian soldier. Both governments accused each other of initiating the attack.

While not naming Pakistan, Singh told the summit: “Terrorism continues to rear its ugly head in our region.” He pointed to the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul. Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, who is under pressure from Washington as well, attempted to ease tensions by meeting Singh on the sidelines of the summit and promising to “investigate” the bomb attack. It was also announced that both countries agreed to continue the “peace process” that has dragged on for years.

However, tensions will not simply disappear. The rivalry between the two states is a product of the reactionary partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 on a Hindu-Muslim communal basis and the geo-political ambitions of the ruling classes of both countries. Whoever carried out the attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul, Islamabad views New Delhi's growing influence in Afghanistan as a threat to its security. For its part, India is seeking to undercut Pakistan and expand its regional influence, including into Central Asia.

Underscoring the tensions, New Delhi accused the ISI on Tuesday of sending 800 Islamic extremists into India. Head of Indian border security forces (BSF), A.K. Mitra, told the *Hindu*: “The ISI is waiting for the opportunity to launch cross-border terrorism”.

Afghan President Karzai has repeatedly blamed Pakistan for encouraging anti-occupation insurgents inside Afghanistan. He is on record as threatening to send the Afghan military into Pakistan's tribal areas near the border to root out Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters.

Karzai declared at the summit that "terrorist attacks are a rapidly growing threat, not just to Afghanistan or India, but for the entire SAARC region". Karzai refused to even shake hands with Gilani at the beginning of the meeting but it was later announced that the two leaders agreed to cooperate in "fighting terrorism".

Immediately after the SAARC summit Karzai flew to New Delhi on Monday to further strengthen ties with India. After meeting Karzai, Singh declared that the attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul "was an attack on friendship" between the two countries. He announced a further \$US450 million in aid to Afghanistan on top of the already allocated \$750 million.

Karzai indicated that discussion had take place on enhancing the defence relationship between the two countries. In an interview with the *Times of India*, he said: "India can offer a lot to Afghanistan in the training of our personnel in various fields at their security institutions."

As well as the "war on terror," the summit declaration included a series of empty promises to address the deepening social and economic problems throughout the region. All the governments at the meeting are facing growing popular discontent over rapidly rising food and fuel prices and deteriorating living standards.

Once again, the SAARC declaration promised to expedite the conclusion of a South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Despite calls from big business and international investors, negotiations over closer economic relations in the region are marred by rivalry and tensions. The target for SAFTA to be completed is 2012 but major obstacles remain.

The *Economist* commented: "This [rivalry] goes a long way to explaining why SAARC has spectacularly failed in its main task: promoting regional economic integration. According to a World Bank report released last year, South Asia is the least integrated region in the world. Trade between SAARC's members accounted for less than 2 percent of their combined GDP."

The summit declaration piously called for "poverty alleviation" and the establishment of a regional food bank to be housed in Bangladesh. The proposal for a food bank was first made at the 2005 SAARC summit. Three years later it is still on the drawing board. Even if it were to be finally established, the food bank would do little to alleviate the desperate situation facing hundreds of millions of people across the subcontinent.

The combined population of South Asia is 25 percent of the world's total or 1.5 billion people. Of those, about 40 percent are living in poverty on less than \$1 a day. According to the World Bank, 75 percent are living on less than \$2 a day.

South Asia has the world's highest proportion of underweight

people—42 percent of the total population. Some 43 percent of the Indian population is suffering from malnutrition. The Sri Lankan Health Ministry admitted on the eve of the summit that 13.5 percent of children under five are suffering from chronic malnutrition and 30 percent from anemia.

Living standards are deteriorating as a result of skyrocketing food and fuel prices. In Sri Lanka, where huge military expenditures have added significantly to rising prices, the inflation rate is running at over 30 percent. Inflation in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal is 21, 12, 10 and 11 percent respectively. Food prices are, however, rising far faster, at rates between 30 to 60 percent.

The ruling elites in these countries are incapable of solving the social crisis and are resorting to increasingly anti-democratic forms of rule. Bangladesh is governed by a military-backed regime. Nepal and Pakistan have very weak and unstable elected governments and in both countries the military is hovering in the background threatening to seize power. The so-called democracies of India and Sri Lanka rely on police-state measures to suppress opposition and social unrest.

Some 60 years after formal independence, the ruling classes throughout the region have proven organically incapable of meeting the basic democratic aspirations or social needs of the vast majority of the population. Far from opposing the predatory activities of imperialism, the governments in each country have been competing to secure the backing of the major powers, above all US imperialism, as they compete for influence. This rivalry, particularly between India and Pakistan, continues to threaten the region with another disastrous war.

In this context, the SAARC summit, far from being the means for closer cooperation, was another arena in the struggle for economic and strategic position.



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