

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been two and a half days of rich, productive and candid discussions among a cross-section of stakeholders from all eight countries of South Asia. In deliberations spanning 4 plenary sessions and 14 parallel sessions, parliamentarians, policymakers, academics, researchers, and private sector entrepreneurs, among others, have articulated elements of a vision for shared prosperity and the pathways for realizing it in a region that is still mired in poverty, deprivations and inequality. The gracious presence of hon'ble ministers in the inaugural session added to the gravitas of the Tenth South Asia Economic Summit. Under the overall theme of Deepening Economic Integration for Inclusive and Sustainable Development, a range of topics spanning different facets of development were up for interactive discussions.

I do not dare summarize all the discussions that have taken place – covering them in all their richness and nuances. I make no such pretence. What follows is an attempt to give a flavour of the deliberations. But rest assured, the painstaking process of transcribing the entire proceedings – to be fed into a comprehensive summary document – will be under way soon after the Summit. That, we hope, will have a chance of doing justice to the views and thoughts expressed, and the recommendations flowing out of them. It would be remiss of me not to thank our team at SAWTEE for doubling up as rapporteurs even as they juggled with other tasks of organization.

With SAARC struggling to even hold its annual Summits, there were robust discussions over its relevance and future. Participants rued the decline in regional integration over the last 70 years due to policy-induced barriers, and emphasized that the rationale for regional cooperation is ever stronger, with the changing nature of production and trade worldwide and the shooting into prominence of climate change challenges. SAARC, or for that matter the regional integration project under it, delegates seemed to concur, is not alive and kicking, but neither is it dead. Economic integration efforts should not just focus on trade but also bring within their ambit

investment cooperation and as simple a step as easing visa processes to facilitate people-to-people contact.

There were views that ownership among the South Asian youth of the idea of a shared South Asian prosperity was critical for taking regional integration forward. And indeed, the Summit has seen an active participation of youths. There were at times spirited, candid exchanges about complex bilateral relationships – which served to highlight, at once, the challenges to deepening economic integration and the potential held by regional cooperation efforts to generate a peace and stability dividend. Suggestions were made for reinvigorating the regional body, including by reforming its architecture, modalities for decision making, and strengthening its secretariat, and drawing on lessons from more successful regional integration projects elsewhere.

It was noted that while countries are turning to subregional and transregional initiatives, there are ample opportunities to leverage them to foster regional integration in its entirety. It was recognized that the rise of China in the immediate neighbourhood, also an observer to SAARC, cannot be ignored, and with several South Asian countries already engaging substantially with China and having joined the Belt and Road Initiative, it is high time to strategize how to utilize this initiative towards regional ends, for South Asia's collective interest, including for South Asian integration – and that the economic logic for this is overwhelming. This came as a recurring, almost a cross-cutting point. Also discussed at length, in a dedicated session, was the potential role of other observers, some of whom are important development partners bilaterally for most South Asian countries, in helping member states achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as well as aiding the regional integration process through, among others, investment, transport connectivity and technology transfer. The possibilities of tapping the observers are tremendous but remain untapped. Using observers as dialogue partners was also suggested. Candid discussions were also held on the challenges associated with seeking a deeper engagement of the observers. The imperative of keeping the SAARC house in order

and strengthening its secretariat while seeking greater and effective engagement of the observers was also recognized.

On trade, the challenges posed by non-tariff barriers to intraregional trade were discussed and possible solutions suggested. The causes of the substantial amounts of informal trade that persist in the region were analysed and research gaps impeding a better understanding of the phenomenon were identified. On investment, it was noted that there exist enormous opportunities for investors to integrate both horizontally as well as vertically, which, however, require complementary policies in addressing transport and logistic services constraints, lowering local transaction costs across the region, attracting intraregional and extraregional FDI as well as involving local SMEs. Expediting the draft regional agreement on investment promotion and protection was emphasized. On migration and remittances, the common challenges facing quite a few South Asian countries that come with the dependence on remittances from migrant workers abroad were discussed, among other things.

It was highlighted that while South Asia achieved much of its MDG goals, there remain high levels of inequality, and creating productive employment, investment in human capital, broadening social protection and inclusion, and access to infrastructure and finance are among the key priorities in South Asian economic integration focused on obtaining SDGs.

On regional energy cooperation, the pathways for regionalizing cooperation that is currently proceeding on a bilateral basis were discussed. On environment and climate change issues, the fact that pollution and black carbon emissions transcend national boundaries, calling for a regional response, served as a powerful reminder of the urgency for regional cooperation.

There were also deliberations on new issues in international trade, generated by advancements in information and communications technology. Issues such as eTrade

– what does it take for South Asia to benefit from it? What are the key elements for the success of eTrade in helping firms integrate into international trade? The opportunities and challenges associated with using new sources of data, satellite data for example, to improve measurement of socioeconomic outcomes, and the mammoth task for collecting data for monitoring progress towards the SDGs were also discussed.

Discussions were also held on governance of intellectual property in the area of plant and genetic resources from the perspective of protection of farmers' rights, strengthening rural economies through innovations and small and medium enterprises, with examples of how the private sector has been able to successfully use innovations and technologies to strengthen rural economies and promote women entrepreneurship, and the need to make innovations low cost while considering the potential adverse impacts on the environment. Ideas too were generated on harnessing regional value chains for employment generation.

Last but not least, in the final plenary that ended just a while ago, rich tributes were paid to the late Dr Saman Kelegama – an eminent figure in the research and policy communities in South Asia who worked tirelessly for the regional integration agenda and a person to whom the South Asia Economic Summit owes its very conception. His very absence is palpable in this tenth anniversary of the Summit. We miss you all Saman – your scholarship, your humility, your friendship, and your vision for a harmonious and prosperous South Asia. It is incumbent on us all to take his vision forward.

Thank you.
