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NEWSDESK

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S.Asia need not be derailed by India-Pakistan spat

By Raju Gopalakrishnan

DHAKA, Nov 14 (Reuters) - Tensions between India and Pakistan have all too often derailed the South Asian bloc they dominate, but analysts said on Monday their testy exchanges at a weekend regional summit need not overwhelm the group this time.

The nuclear-powered neighbours both said their ties were marked by a lack of trust, hardly a positive portent for attempts by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to chart a new course after 20 years of doing very little.

Analysts said, however, there were signs that SAARC, one of the poorest regions in the world, had matured enough to be guided more by economic imperatives, despite its spotty record.

"Politics will not be able to hijack SAARC," said Mohammad Ibrahim, a retired Bangladesh army major-general and political commentator. "India and Pakistan's problems have been there for decades now. It will continue to be there."

SAARC's seven nations are home to one-fifth of humanity, and about a third of their peoples are impoverished. India dominates South Asia with about 70 percent of its population, land and wealth, with Pakistan the second-biggest nation.

But despite their three wars and only a sluggish peace process, SAARC is on the way to launching a free trade zone from the start of 2006, has admitted Afghanistan as a new member and provisionally approved China and Japan as observer nations.

"Spats come and go. These are not the end of the world," said Indian political commentator Prem Shankar Jha. "The point is that in spite all this, SAARC took place and took two very important decisions (Afghanistan and China-Japan).

"So there's a world of difference."

PITFALLS

Still, many pitfalls lie ahead for the group, which also includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Free trade will be a non-starter unless more border points are opened and transit is freely allowed, both of which will have to be steered past domestic compulsions in each country.

Almost all nations in the region suffer from internal strife, which could make following through on multilateral initiatives a low priority.

Nepal is being devastated by a Maoist rebellion, Bangladesh is grappling with Islamic fundamentalists who set off hundreds of bombs across the country earlier this year, and Sri Lanka is still poked by the Tamil insurgency.

Pakistan is fighting Islamic radicals, while India is battling rebellions in Kashmir and in the northeastern states.

But India, a \$700 billion economy with one of the world's highest growth rates, has also increasingly become a player on the global stage in recent years and could well be looking beyond SAARC.

"If SAARC doesn't take significant steps in the next couple of years to do something, they are going to be a completely defunct organisation," said Ramkishan Rajan, visiting associate professor at Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

"I think the largest member is going to say, fine, in name we will be part of the organisation but as far we are concerned, we want to be involved with a more dynamic part of the world."

Next month, India attends its first session of the East Asian summit, which includes the 10 nations in Southeast Asia, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

"Until recently India had no other place to go," Rajan added. "Certainly India would love it if there was forward movement there as well (SAARC) but the fact is that it has other options. The big question is what does that imply for SAARC and South Asian trade liberalisation."

The key need for SAARC of course is for India and Pakistan to quickly set their peace process back on track. And despite their tortured history since gaining independence in 1947, they have been able to do that in the past.

"I think the momentum needs to be revived very quickly," said Jha, the analyst in New Delhi. "If it is allowed to continue, we could end up with the worst possible stalemate where (Pakistan President Pervez) Musharraf would have lost his capacity to broker any deal at all with India." (Additional reporting by Palash Kumar in New Delhi)

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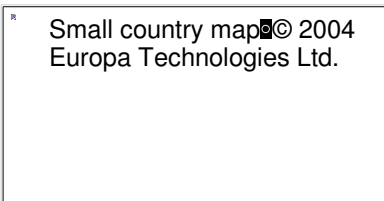
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