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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, fourth from left, with leaders of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations in New Delhi. From left, Afghan President Hamid Karzai; Bangladesh's Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government Fakhruddin Ahmed; Bhutan's Prime Minister Lyonpo Bhandu Wangchuk; Prime Minister Singh; Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom; Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala; Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz; and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The historic 14th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) drew to a close in New Delhi on April 4, with Afghanistan attending the expanded fraternity's meeting among heads of state and government for the first time as a regular member to find a well-deserved, rightful place within the association that now has eight members.

Afghanistan, represented at the summit by President Hamid Karzai, was formally inducted on April 3 and, thereby, joined seven other nations — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — in the regional grouping.

"I wish to welcome President Hamid Karzai and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan into the SAARC fraternity. India feels privileged that Afghanistan's first SAARC Summit, as a full mem-

ber, is being hosted by India," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in his opening remarks at the summit held at Vigyan Bhavan on April 3.

The import of the summit — conducted in a smooth and frank manner — was further accentuated by the fact that China, Japan, South Korea, the United States and the European Union participated in the two-day deliberations as observers.

President Karzai, on his part, said Afghanistan's full membership into SAARC will maximise benefits to people of the whole region and thanked the assembled leaders for including his country as part of their family.

In the past five years, Afghanistan has witnessed developments in many spheres. Children have been able to go back to school and women can participate in all walks of life, he said amid applause.

"Afghanistan is a natural and

indispensable member of the SAARC community. I am sure Afghanistan will play its valuable role to strengthen the organisation," Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz added.

At the summit, the leaders made a call for a South Asian Economic Union and a South Asian Customs Union to accelerate economic development of the world's most populous region that holds tremendous potential. They also came down heavily on the targeted killing of civilians by terror groups. A declaration adopted at the end of the summit also covered a variety of other subjects, aimed at deepening ties within the 22-year-old regional grouping.

In his closing remarks, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh — the chairperson of SAARC till its next summit — said he had witnessed a new sense of purpose in the two days of deliberations.

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Highlights of the SAARC Declaration

- The heads of states and government of India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka met for the 14th SAARC summit in New Delhi on April 3-4.
- The leaders welcomed the entry of Afghanistan into SAARC — a historic moment as Afghanistan assumed its rightful place as a valued member of the fraternity.
- The leaders reiterated their commitment to the principles and objectives of the Charter.
- They recognised the importance of connectivity in fulfilling the charter's objectives. It was vital to first have better connectivity within South Asia and then with the rest of the world.

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