



## South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Countries and the Role of Regional Development

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**ABSTRACT:** Regionalism became the protrude trait of international politics by 1940s and 1950s. A huge number of regional organizations started coming up around this time. The major aim of regional organizations was national security and economic progress by integrating the region. India was fairly late in recognizing the importance of regional organizations. Though there were attempts made from the pre-independence era. The idea of South Asian or South East Asian unity did not catch the idea of Indian policy makers. For most part region around India was taken for granted, it was only in the year 1985 India seek to join its first regional organization in the form of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It was the stepping stone for India into a completely platform.

**KEYWORDS:** Economic, International Politics, Policy Making, Regional, Security, Unity

*Received 16 November, 2020; Accepted 02 December, 2020 © The author(s) 2020.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

During Nehru's era efforts were made for a larger and wider regional cooperation, He envisaged a cooperation of Afro-Asian countries. Although India pursued a friendly approach to the countries in the region in that time, it was for India's national interest and also as a strategy to keep the neighborhood peaceful. This helped India in actively involving in the world affairs at that time. Other factors like nation-building, economic development etc. were also responsible for India not looking around the region. India continued its friendly relations in the Indira Gandhi era also. However, it could not be continued for long. The 1971 war with Pakistan and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh reflected India's power aspirations. The subsequent nuclear tests and the annexation of Sikkim raised a sense of insecurity amongst the smaller countries in the region. Apart from Pakistan India also developed a strained relationship with Bangladesh. Around this time India was not in a position to initiate any regional cooperation due to the poor relations with its neighbors.

It was only in the period of Morarji Desai that a concrete initiation to form 'a regional cooperation in South Asia' started by President Zia-Ur Rahman. India had its own reservation about joining the organization in the beginning. In spite of all the reservation India under the leadership of Indira Gandhi agreed to join the negotiations for creating SAARC. Finally, SAARC was formed in 1985 under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi making it India's first regional organization. India maintained a passive approach in SAARC to deal with the skeptic neighborhood (Bhattacharjee, J. 2018).

The main objectives of SAARC according Charter are: "to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials; to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia; to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems; to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries; to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes." Apart from this all the decisions taken will only be taken with the consensus of all the member countries and it also decided to keep out bilateral issues away from SAARC, (Bose, S. 2018)

India is seen as a hazard by the smaller countries of the area. India tries to maintain a peaceful relation with its south Asian neighbors but there is conflict of interest which deters the peaceful relations once in a while. When we look into India's relations with south Asian countries bilaterally, we can find that India holds a cordial relationship with Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Maldives. India and Afghanistan have had a very friendly relation historically due to their common rivalry with Pakistan. India has maintained a very friendly approach with Bhutan and Maldives since a very long time without any major conflicts. India's relation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal are of ups and downs. Initially India and Bangladesh started off very well, with India playing a very important role in its freedom movement. After a brief period of friendship, the relations soured due to the political situations prevailing in Bangladesh. At present India and Bangladesh holds a very cordial relationship amongst them. India's relations with island nation Sri Lanka also started off with a positive note. India in 1971 had supported Sri Lanka in suppressing leftist rebellion. Later, with the conflict between LTTE and Sri Lanka started the relationship between the two countries also developed some troubles. Currently both the countries maintain peaceful and friendly relations with each other's with many joint initiatives under progress. As in the context of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, India's relation with Nepal also started in a high. In fact, after Bhutan India holds the most cordial relation with Nepal. The trouble in the relations with Nepal was also due to the political situations in the country, which gradually improved when the political situations improved. At present apart from some minor issues India's relation with Nepal also is very peaceful. India's troubles in bilateral relations starts from its relationship with Pakistan. India and Pakistan have fought four wars amongst them since independence. The issue of Kashmir also remains to be one of the most controversial issues till date. India's relationship with Pakistan has only developed troubles with every passing decade. The recent 'Uri and Pulwama' attacks have only made the matters worst for both the countries, (Italia, 2011)

Success and failure of international organizations depends on many factors such as its structure, mandate, geography, relations amongst its members etc. while considering the case of SAARC there seems to be a problem in all of the above-mentioned features. SAARC is considered to be formed as a response to the other successful regional organizations. In the case of SAARC there are many problems such as structural problems, conflict of interests, rivalry amongst members, mistrust, political instability and asymmetry in terms of geography, economy, population etc. Since its inception in 1985 it has been in existence for more than three decades now, the organization till now has not been able to bring many significant changes to the region. The cause for the below par performance of SAARC are the reasons mentioned above. The region despite being geographically very well integrated remains to be poorly integrated with a very limited and slow progress.

India started to look towards its east after the 'cold war' and the breakdown of USSR. The Look East Policy (LEP) was a very important policy taken by the Indian policy makers in 1990s under the prime minister ship of 'P V Narasimha Rao'. The main aim of the strategy was to revive the lost ties with the countries of east of India. Historically the region was very well integrated it was after the freedom from colonial rule the region backtracked. Along with freedom, political borders also came up in the region with that trade and other cross border contacts reduced significantly. The lukewarm and poor relations with neighboring countries had made it difficult for India to progress economically in south Asian cooperation. The main aim of LEP is to achieve the growth and development of the country by operating more closely with India's Asian partners. LEP helps India in connecting to ASEAN countries, countering china and also gives an additional benefit of developing India's north eastern part. The LEP was formulated under very different political and economic circumstances, its main aim was connecting with Asian tigers, the association of six ASEAN countries which was growing at a very fast pace (Chaturvedy, R. R. 2018)

The National Democratic Alliance government under prime minister Modi have a new dimension to the relations with the south East Asian nations by introducing "The Act East Policy". "The Act East policy is the successor of the Look East Policy". The policy as the name suggest conveys a message that India will not only look towards its eastern neighbors, it will also take initiative and engage with the countries of the east. The policy provided a boost to the slow progressing India's relations with the east and the ASEAN countries. The policy also seeks to look beyond the region to the countries of the Far East. The policy will benefit the northeastern states of India and West Bengal significantly due to its location as an important connecting point to the east.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Some serious problems have arisen in SAARC recently. SAARC's performance has also been not that satisfactory considering the huge potentials and people to people contact. One of the main reasons for the below par performance of SAARC has been the regional rivalry between its member countries mainly between India and Pakistan. Another reason for the failure of SAARC is the mutual distrust among its members. India has had to face many hurdles in SAARC. India is always criticized for showing big brother attitude in the organization. The imbalance in size, economy, military might and the position of India in the global arena are the main reasons for this conception. Many countries in SAARC now engage in bilateral relationships as SAARC has been ineffective for their causes. The organization has to be completely reframed to put some life in the

organization which is in the brink of death; many have questioned the worth of refurbishing SAARC. In the recent years BIMSTEC has turned out to be the perfect alternative to SAARC. Historically, India has had strong relations with BIMSTEC countries especially with Southeast countries however as the years passed. Political boundaries came up and the contact amongst the countries reduced. The initiation of 'Look East Policy' by then Prime Minister of India P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1991 and initiation of 'Look West Policy' by Thailand in 1996 gave a new lease of life to the lost ties in the region. The Uri attacks of 2016 and the cancellation of the following summit to be held in Islamabad have once again started the debate if India has to look beyond SAARC and if BIMSTEC could be that Ideal regional organization that suits India's interests and idea of regional organization.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The present study is descriptive in nature. The study evaluates importance of SAARC. The study is descriptive as it describes the relations, failures, achievements of SAARC. The study also explores the possibilities of SAARC to the growth of their respective region of focus. Data Sources include books, research papers, newspaper articles, Journal articles, Government documents. Most of this information has been obtained from the virtual world.

### **PROFILE OF THE SAARC:**

SAARC was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. There are eight Member States in SAARC: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.(SAARC, 2019). On 17 January 1987 the secretariat of the association was set up in Kathmandu, Nepal. The eight member states of SAARC combined have a total area of nearly 2 million square miles, making up a total of 3% of the world's area. The population across all of the member states is over 1.7 billion, accounting for 21% of the world's total population (World Population Review, 2017)

### **SAARC Summits**

Usually SAARC summits are held once in two years, facilitated by a Member State in sequential order. The Member State facilitating the Summit assumes the Chair of the Association. The key result of a SAARC Summit is a Declaration. The Summit Declaration contains choices and mandates of the Leaders to fortify and merge local collaboration in various territories being sought after under the support of SAARC. The Declaration is embraced by the Leaders at the finishing up session of a Summit. The Summit is also attended by Heads of Observer states and by the Secretary General.

### **SAARC Chapter**

SAARC charter consists of the aims and motives of SAARC as a regional organization the original SAARC charter as per the official website of SAARC, lists out the following goals and objectives; "We, the Heads of State or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka;

1. Desirous of promoting peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and Non- Alignment, particularly respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all disputes;
  2. Conscious that in an increasingly interdependent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighborly relations and meaningful cooperation among the Member States which are bound by ties of history and culture;
  3. Aware of the common problems, interests and aspirations of the peoples of South Asia and the need for joint action and enhanced cooperation within their respective political and economic systems and cultural traditions;
  4. Convinced that regional cooperation among the countries of South Asia is mutually beneficial, desirable and necessary for promoting the welfare and improving the quality of life of the peoples of the region;
  5. Convinced further that economic, social and technical cooperation among the countries of South Asia would contribute significantly to national and collective self- reliance;
  6. Recognizing that increased cooperation, contacts and exchanges among the countries of the region will contribute to the promotion of friendship and understanding among their peoples;
  7. Recalling the Declaration signed by their Foreign Ministers in New Delhi on August 2, 1983 and noting the progress achieved in regional cooperation;
  8. Reaffirming their determination to promote such cooperation within an institutional framework;
- DO HEREBY AGREE to establish an organization to be known as SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION hereinafter referred to as the ASSOCIATION, with the following objectives, principles, institutional and financial arrangements." (SAARC, 2019)

SAARC charter is followed by ten articles which namely deals with 'Objectives', 'principles', meeting of the 'heads of state or government', 'council of ministers', 'standing committee', 'technical committees', 'action committee', 'secretariat', 'financial arrangements' and 'general provisions'. Which is further followed by the name of the signatories?

### **ACHIEVEMENTS OF SAARC**

SAARC has made gigantic improvement inferable from the connection and helpful endeavors being placed in by the part states. The advancement and improvement of SAARC amid the ongoing years can be taken a gander at under the accompanying headings:

**Substantial Increase in Cooperation** Since the development of SAARC in 1985, the dimension of participation among the part nations expanded significantly. SAARC was set up with the target of improving the expectations for everyday comforts of the general population, social and provincial monetary development and expanding participation with different districts of the world. Amid the ongoing years, understanding the significance of territorial collaboration and advancement, SAARC members have now made a feeling of quickening regional economic improvement and they advocate recovery of the association by moving from simply the issuance of declaration to handy usage of the plans and arrangements to transform this frail district into a possibly created one.

**Economic and Trade Discussions** For the accomplishment of SAARC, economic and trade collaboration is particularly critical and in actuality the principal thing to be centered on for the advancement of South Asia. Amid the 1990s, SAARC talked about the Preferential Trading Area (SAPTA) among the part nations which was emerged in the state of Free Trade Agreement which is currently known as South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). According to this understanding, the tax decrease plan was chalked out and since 2006, this decrease had been done in two stages i.e. Pakistan and India promised to put duties on every one of the merchandise down to 20% inside two years and every other nation to 30% inside three years.

**Increase in External Support/Cooperation with Observers** It merits referencing that being a poor district, SAARC nations can't build up every single part of their economies alone. They need backing and help with capital, assets, instruction and innovation from the more created districts and individual nations. One of the positive focuses in the ongoing years has been the enthusiasm of the other created nations in SAARC who need to give assistance in social and monetary fields. The part nations have achieved the end amid the ongoing years that they would respect any help from the spectator nations and being eyewitnesses, USA, Japan, China, South Korea, Iran and EU are happy to offer help e.g. Japan has unmistakably offered assistance in social foundation improvement and calamity the board, China offered gift to South Asian Development Fund and the ongoing help has likewise originated from China to maintain the China-South Asia Business Forum. SAARC has built up systematized game plans for participation with various other local groupings and worldwide and territorial associations. SAARC has additionally been making understandings and MOUs with other local and universal Global Journal of Engineering Technology, Management and Applied Sciences associations like United Nations Development Program (UNDP), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP), Asia Pacific Tele community (APT), and United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF). This outer help gives a lift to the points and goal of SAARC to push ahead for the better future in the social and financial fields and it is additionally a decent open door for the individuals to create between state collaboration inside South Asia.

**Social Cohesion among Member Countries/People to People Contacts** One of the hugest destinations of SAARC is to build individuals to individual's contacts. In spite of the fact that within the sight of substantial scale institutional set up, it is very hard to make a domain for open social collaboration however amid the ongoing years, the part nations have understood the significance of this part of participation and because of this reasoning, SAARC has endeavored to embrace a program of well-connected South Asia and that can be conceivable when individuals are shut together for which a few activities have been taken like: SAARC chairs, Fellowship and scholarship schemes, SAARC visa exemption scheme, South Asian Festivals, Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians, SAARC Law, SAARC Chamber of commerce and industries etc. In addition, the common social orders in the part nations of SAARC are additionally attempting to make more correspondence arranges between researchers, essayists, writers, academicians, resigned common and military authorities. The accomplishment of Track II strategy among Pakistan and India is likewise one of the viewpoints affected by this wide goal of territorial improvement. As indicated by Former Indian Prime Minister I. K. Gujral "I have the expanding feeling that un-official SAARC will be the main impetus behind the authority SAARC. This is some kind of, New Regionalism" which is inundating the whole South Asian district". SAARC has colossally created individuals' network inside South Asia.

**COOPERATION ON SECURITY AND TERRORISM:** the SAARC Convention on concealment of Terrorism was marked in 1987 and later the Additional Protocol on Terrorism was marked considering the fear-based oppressor financing structure. This was as per UN Security Council Resolution 1373. The Additional Protocol on Terrorism was received in 2005 after much discussion and talk on the meaning of fear-based

oppression. Regardless of these two critical reports on fear-based oppression, there has not been much excitement to collaborate on issues of psychological oppressor savagery and subsidizing between the part nations. Participation has been restricted to respective initiatives' SAARC Terrorist Offenses Monitoring Desk (STOMD), Colombo, Sri Lanka SAARC Drug Offenses Monitoring Desk (SDOMD), and Colombo, Sri Lanka (Juergens, L. 2014, April 23).

**POVERTY ERADICATION:** As one of the least fortunate locales of the world, it is a standout amongst the most vital needs of SAARC to offer thoughtfulness regarding this primary goal of destitution easing. The complete populace of SAARC eight individuals is over 1.6 billion and 40% of this populace is living beneath the neediness line. The ignorance rate is about or considerably in excess of 50 percent. The assignment isn't simple however with conviction and vision for stable territorial collaboration, this point can be accomplished. The seventeen SAARC Summit in 2011 concurred the most astounding need to the mitigation of destitution in South Asia and chose to reinforce the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA) which was built up in 1991 comprising of famous people from part states to lead a top to bottom investigation of the various encounters of part states. The systems for poverty alleviation were proposed as: Access to safe drinking water, Education, developing human resources, raising nutritional standards etc. (Kumar, R. 2018, Sajjanhar, A. 2016, May).

**FINANCIAL COOPERATION:** the Meetings of the Finance Ministers of SAARC is a critical component of SAARC motivation. Till now, four Meetings of the Finance Ministers of SAARC have been held in Pakistan (July 11, 2006), India (September 15, 2007), Maldives (May 14, 2009) and Bhutan (August 24, 2010). The First Meeting of SAARC Finance Ministers affirmed the foundation of an Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Financial issues including improvement of the guide for accomplishing the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a staged way. The Member States are trading Concept Papers in the territory of account. A SAARC Expert Group on Development of Capital Markets in South Asia was additionally held at the SAARC Secretariat on December 27, 2011 as prescribed by the SAARC Finance Ministers. 6th gathering of Intergovernmental Expert Group on Financial issues occurred at SAARC Secretariat on 23-24 April, 2013. The Seventh casual gathering of SAARC Finance Ministers occurred in New Delhi on May 3, 2013 and Progress is being made the positive way with respect to budgetary collaboration while considering and opening new entryways for participation (Sundaram, D. 2013)

**INTEGRATED PROGRAM OF ACTION (IPA):** The IPA is an essential program of the SAARC procedure and incorporates 12 zones of participation, each being secured by an assigned Technical Committee. The Secretary-General reports to the Standing Committee on the advancement in the authorization of IPA. The Standing Committee likewise surveys the institutional instruments and the working of the Technical Committees, their command and furthermore assessing the job of the Secretariat. The different boards of trustees working under IPA are as per the following: Agricultural technical committee, Environment, Child welfare, health, tourism, transportation, rural development etc. (Indian Express. 2019, March 16).

The territorial association job has been expanded in this globalization time. The reliance of countries has been expanded. SAARC is the world's greatest association in term of population it has 22 percent of absolute populace. On the off chance that SAARC part helps every one of its part nation financially, at that point neediness and lack of education can without much of a stretch be decrease. SAARC individuals need to take precedent, how European Union and ASEAN are prevailing in its objective. Presently plainly monetary improvement will happen when globalization and provincial help participate in this. In SAARC summit 2009 which was held in Islamabad it was chosen that till 2012 South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) will happen. However, there is no more advancement yet. Small countries are stressed over that SAFTA will support just huge countries. Be that as it may, it isn't valid. Sri Lanka fare to India has been expanded 135 percent for every year. In the event that we analyze it as far as India is just 32 percent. India exchange to Bangladesh and Pakistan isn't expanded because of numerous areas (Giri, Karinje & Vema, 2015)

### **SHORTCOMINGS OF SAARC:**

To start with, it is far to achieve the objective of poverty alleviation. As one of the poorest regions on the planet, it is an immense assignment. The total populace of eight nations in South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) is over 1.6 billion, over 40% of which are living under poverty line, with lack of education rate being over half. As indicated by information from earlier years, the per capita GDP of South Asia is even lower than the world's most unfortunate sub-Saharan Africa's. As of late, albeit a few nations gained noteworthy ground in monetary development, the impact is as yet restricted. Generally, the expectation for everyday comforts in South Asia is still low, and living states of numerous individuals there are as yet poor, with access to nourishment, drinking water, well-being administrations, and instructive standard far beneath ordinary line. For a solitary nation, the Sri Lanka common war simply finished, and the war in Afghanistan has been continuing for a long time, while Pakistan is caught into outrageous characteristic and man-made challenges. We should concede that the collaboration of SAARC in against poverty alleviation (SAARC. 2019, April 8).

Second, the economic and trade participation is extremely troublesome. Seen from their monetary scale and improvement levels, there is a significant reciprocity among the South Asian nations. However, most nations bear substantial burden of external obligations, their foreign exchanges is experiencing strain. Development reserves are rare and nations are required to acquire help and advances every year from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund just as some newly created nations. Economic collaboration, particularly participation in the fields of industry and finance experiences incredible challenges. Intra-regional exchange of South Asia has become gradually because of various factors.

Third, poor bilateral relations constrain collaboration. As per the SAARC Charter, SAARC does not examine bilateral and contentious issues. Due to historic and geopolitical reasons, there are numerous bilateral debates among South Asian nations, which are hard to determine. The elements of debate regularly include indispensable interests of the nations concerned, and the two sides would not easily surrender their case, which poses a genuine effect on the development of territorial collaboration. Tending to ethnic, religious, water and different cross-outskirt issues requires time.

Fourth, South Asia being a problematic area with respect to terrorism. SAARC has failed to curb cross-border terrorism to a great extent. The question of eradication of terrorism and the damages caused by it reminds a serious challenge. Terrorism also has a serious repercussion for the stability of the SAARC region as a whole (Jilai, 2012)

### **III. CONCLUSION:**

SAARC which was established in 1985 with the aim of economic cooperation, poverty eradication and promoting regional cooperation having completed more than three decades of existence, the cooperation has made a little progress. The organization started off very well with the inking of agreements such as SAFTA to promote trade within the region and ultimately progressing towards its aims. The organization also made certain structural adjustments to accommodate countries outside the region as the years passed. Onset of globalization and other international scenarios made it important to accommodate countries and organizations from outside the region as observers. These observer countries and organizations provided SAARC with the opportunity to connect globally.

Basically, SAARC was created as the region having close cultural and historical linkages faces similar kinds of problems. At present SAARC faces numerous other challenges, the region despite having clear goals and aims of poverty eradication, economic progress and to enhance cooperation in various other aspects. However, the region remains to be one of the least integrated and poverty-stricken regions. Even though some countries of the region have progressed, there has not been a unison development of the region. In economic context also most of the countries perform very poorly with the total intra SAARC trade only amounting to five percent of the total regions trade. This is after the region being very well integrated geographically and the region having favorable trade agreement like SAFTA, bitter relations and rivalry amongst the member countries of SAARC, especially of India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan rivalry traces back to the independence and the contention over the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The two nuclear enabled SAARC members have been to war four times since their independence. Issues and conflicts also exist among other SAARC neighbors such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Frequent conflicts and issues mostly end in SAARC summits getting postponed or cancelled, which ultimately hampers the progress of SAARC. Similarly, India has also had to face many problems in SAARC mainly due to its geographical size, economic and military strengths. Smaller countries of the region see India as a threat itself and mostly accuse India of showing the 'Big Brother' attitude and play the 'China Card' against India. India mostly had to maintain a low profile despite its strengths in the organization to keep the smaller countries happy. Pakistan was also causing roadblocks to many ambitious SAARC initiatives with the external influence of China lately.

SAARC summit of 2016 which was scheduled to be held at Islamabad, Pakistan was suspended indefinitely under the backdrop of Uri camp attacks. Meanwhile India has started showing more interest towards another sub regional organization BIMSTEC. Although the organization has been in existence since 1997 it is only recently that the organization has been given its due importance. This was due to many happenings and policy shifts of India, such as the shift from the 'Look East' policy to the 'Act East' policy under the newly formed NDA government under the Prime minister ship of Modi. The development of India's north eastern region, the underperformance of SAARC and the raising rivalries and cross border terrorism, all these factors combined together led India to give more focus on BIMSTEC in the recent times.

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Dr. Suresh Vadranam, et. al. "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Countries and the Role of Regional Development." *Quest Journals Journal of Software Engineering And Simulation*, Vol. 06, No. 03, 2020, Pp. 18-24.