

## **A study of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Along With Its Role, Challenges and Prospects**

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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. 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. It has played an important role by bringing the member countries closer together by holding various meetings and summits at various levels. Though overall development of this organization is marred by internal disputes and various other factors but still its establishment and the sense to develop regional integration has created a hope for its future progress. This research paper analyzes the role of SAARC. A critical evaluation has also been made of why SAARC has not been able to develop at par with other developed organizations like European Union (EU). The potential areas of cooperation have been pointed out and suggestions have been put forwarded for removing the existent hurdles and to move the wheel of integration in South Asia more fastly for improving the conditions of poor people in this region.*

**KEYWORDS:** *International Politics, Regional, Security, SAARC, India, Regionalism, Integration, South Asia, Economic Interests, organization.*

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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 Gandhiera 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.

The lingering legacies of South Asia's colonial past; uncontrolled human and other movements across sensitive, porous unsettled borders; ethnic and religious differences; intra-regional economic disparities and resultant bilateral disputes were some factors delaying establishment of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) until 1985. Its Charter ruled out bilateral and contentious issues from its agenda as a protective clause. The world today is witnessing changes in terms of global and regional fundamentals. There is no denying the fact that the importance of peace and development through effective regional and global integration has become an important factor of these times. The strength and development of the states today is not measured in terms of military and defense capacity but in terms of how a state is able to promote trade relations, investments and economic integration within the region and globally as well. We see the impact of this importance of regionalism in South Asian in the emergence of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional cooperation). Wealth of human and material resources coupled with other common features like geographical proximity, historical backgrounds, commonality of social and political norms of development led towards the formation of South Asian grouping known as SAARC. It is important to note that the main idea behind SAARC

formation was the promotion of political, economic and social interaction, common vision for using region's potential and interdependence to counter threats. Though unsuccessful in some fields, the overall assessment of SAARC performance shows not very negative trends but emphasizes the need to collaborate further by resolving all outstanding disputes among the member countries and to create understanding on stable basis. It is important to assess the origin, evolution and achievements of SAARC in detail.



**Figure1: Members of SAARC**

#### **1. ORIGIN OF SAARC**

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an organization of South Asian nations, established on December 8, 1985. It is headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The very first proposal for establishing a framework for regional integration in South Asia was made by the late president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, on May 2, 1980. Prior to this, the idea of South Asian integration was discussed in at least three conferences: the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in April 1947, the Baguio Conference in the Philippines in May 1950, and the Colombo Powers Conference in April 1954.<sup>iii</sup> The governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka formally adopted its charter providing for the promotion of social, economic and cultural development within the South Asian region and also for friendship and cooperation with other developing countries. Its seven founding members were Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh while Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Observer states include USA, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar, Mauritius, Iran and European Union. Meetings of heads of state are usually held on annual basis and meetings of foreign secretaries twice a year.





**Figure 2: Origin of SAARC**

### **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.

### **3. ACHIEVEMENTS/ROLE OF SAARC**

In the past twenty six years, SAARC has made tremendous improvement owing to the interaction and cooperative efforts being put in by the member states. The progress and development of SAARC during the recent years can be looked at under the following 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**

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

#### **4. CONSTRAINING FACTORS /HURDLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAARC**

There are some serious constraints which are, no doubt, not allowing South Asian cooperation to develop. Some of these hurdles can be described as:

#### **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 reciprocally 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)

### **5. CONSTRAINING FACTORS /HURDLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAARC**

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### **INTER-STATE DISPUTES IN SOUTH ASIA**

One of the major hurdles in the way of cooperation among the SAARC members is the mistrust, mutual security perceptions and hostility. All the members of this organization feel in one way or another threat to their political, economic and territorial stability from the neighboring countries.<sup>xii</sup> They are still entrapped in the historical conflicts of colonial rule and the disputed environment after the departure of Colonial Masters i.e loss of property, lives, identities and communal violence. There are always high risks that any time the efforts for cooperation can suffer due to communal and terrorist threats.

### **FEAR OF INDIAN DOMINATION**

Another most important cause of SAARC failure is that there is a fear of India's hegemonic role in the region. Indian desire to participate in the decision making process of the region as a leader has caused concerns among the neighboring countries particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.<sup>xiv</sup> The political, diplomatic and security concerns felt by the member countries of SAARC in South Asia has obstructed any positive development among the member countries.



### **CIVILIZATIONS CLASH**

Professor Samuel Huntington has mentioned in his book *The Clash of Civilizations* that SAARC has been a failure because according to him the countries belonging to organizations like EU etc they belong to same culture but SAARC countries are those whose cultures are different. India and Pakistan are enemies of each other, they fight on minor things, and then how can these two countries support each other in one organization. No country in the region is having any feeling of belongingness with the other state.

### **UNSTABLE FINANCIAL POSITIONS**

The weak financial position of the member countries has also created an uncertain future for this organization. This weak financial position is reflected in the trade imbalances among the member countries. The SAARC members are financially and economically not very much developed. This thing is not conducive for the economic integration of South Asia. Most of the member countries export similar products and in that too, India plays a major role. This situation encourages the least developed countries to go for aid demands/arrangements and extra-regional trade which is not favorable for the regional economic interaction. The member countries of SAARC are not complementing each other but they are competing in fact. Mutual trade is very low. The lower level of intra-region trade in South Asia has made the objective of this organization a failure.

### **ASYMMETRY BETWEEN INDIA AND MEMBER COUNTRIES**

There is economic, technological and demographic imbalance between India and other member countries of SAARC. India being larger in size, economy and possessing high technological infrastructure dominates other members. India accounts for more than three quarters of the regional GDP and technological infrastructure and two third of the global exports of the region. The smaller countries in South Asia feel uncomfortable about their trade relations with India because under the current tariff structure, India runs a large trade surplus with her neighbors. Also, India's volume of informal trade with most of its neighbors is quite enormous. All south Asian countries look up to India to share its huge markets due to its size and location, where 80% of the intra-regional trade in south Asia is to or from India. India blames the failure of SAFTA on Pakistan but it is not true at all because SAFTA requires Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka to bring their duties down to 20%. Moreover, India is attached to all the other member countries geographically as she is in the middle of the region and others are on the periphery. It can be said that without India, other member countries cannot move ahead as India links all the members together.

### **LACK OF TRUST AMONG THE MEMBER COUNTRIES**

There is also lack of trust among the member states of SAARC which does not auger well for future development of this regional organization. They still live in the cobweb of history and mutual rivalries and mistrust has caused them enormous damage already. The elites do not trust each other mainly because of their nationalistic feelings, vested interests and inter-state disputes.

In the presence of such disputes, this regional organization cannot be hoped to be developed on stable footing.

### **EXCLUSION OF CONTENTIOUS ISSUES FROM SAARC CHARTER**

The charter of SAARC itself has some self-imposed anomalies as its charter has the provision of not discussing the contentious and bilateral disputes. On the one hand, it asks for increased cooperation and exchanges and on the other hand, avoids negotiations on bilateral disputes. The charter also requires that all the decisions will be taken unanimously which becomes quite difficult. This clearly shows an unstable inter-state relationship towards equal participation in policy making for South Asian people. It can be said that the charter itself denies the true purpose of the organization. In such kind of conditions, it cannot be said to be developed on sound basis.

### **DIFFERENT POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

All the South Asian countries are having different kinds of political systems which is also the reason for the failure of SAARC. South Asia has not been a strong democratic region. Like in India there is democracy, in Pakistan there is transitional democracy, kingship in Nepal and presidential system in Sri Lanka. Most of the countries have remained unstable. The dispute between the two countries i.e. Pakistan and India over Kashmir issue has never let these two countries to go well together and set aside their differences on the SAARC forum. Apart from this, India is having disputes with rest of the member countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and this thing has not helped SAARC objectives to be achieved.



### **LACK OF PEOPLE TO PEOPLE CONTACTS**

The contact of the people with the Association is zero as well as with the people of the member countries. They do not know when was the Association made and what was the purpose behind it. In such a kind of scenario, how can they join together to help their own states solve their problems.

### **LACK OF STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE**

South Asian countries share some common features as well like cheap labor, low incomes, low value added commodities and comparative advantage in some commodities like tea and garments etc. The intra-regional trade cannot be successful in such conditions where the trade and economic structure and industrial infrastructure is similar. Almost all the member countries are not very strong economically and instead of intra-regional trade, they search for other markets globally.

### **PATHETIC CONDITION OF SOUTH ASIA**

About 300 million people of the South Asian region lack basic facilities and it is the most deprived region in terms that more than 340 million people lack safe drinking water. More than 840 million are without good sanitation and 400 million go hungry every day. SAARC is the most militarized place in world; its two countries Pakistan and India are spending 30 billion dollars on their defense expense. Afghanistan, its new member is facing war. In view of these all major problems, how such an Association can successfully work.

### **SOME OTHER PROBLEMS WITH SAARC**

There are also some other constraints with the processes of SAARC which can be described as follows:

- The inability of the officials and leaders to envision the potential advantages of regional integration. In other words, we can say that the leaders have not yet made a serious and sincere cost-benefit analysis of the advantages of cooperation and damages of no cooperation.
- Very strict rules followed at the official level and by the SAARC Secretariat.
- Red tapism, paper work and bureaucratic hassles at the secretariat due to which every task takes more than required time to be completed.
- Unnecessary formalities
- Lack of political will at the leadership level.
- The condition of unanimous decision making and consensus building for the issues which can be resolved bilaterally.
- Absence of collective vision for rejuvenating the region in the face of the globalization challenge.
- Border clashes and war like situation accentuated by infiltration and terrorism accusations.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

South Asian region can be stabilized and cemented if policy initiatives both at the government and non-government levels are taken by South Asian leaders with commitment and mutual trust. Some of these initiatives and policy actions can be suggested as such:

### **IN THE POLITICAL FIELD**

#### **a) Role of India**

India should play her role not as a big brother but as an equal partner for the stability and cooperation in South Asia. SAARC is not an unimportant forum rather its significance has increased in the face of changing global and regional patterns so India should be aware of this scenario. Most of the disputes in South Asia are Indo-centric so India should adopt a low profile to get the confidence of its smaller neighbors.

#### **b) Formation of Conflict Conciliation Groups**

The CCGs can be formed for resolving the bilateral disputes when all parties to a particular dispute agree to seek SAARC help either to investigate the problem or conduct a fact finding study. The composition of the CCG can include a representative each from the parties seeking help of the group as well as one or more representatives from other member states to ensure impartiality. Such groups can take up studies of problems relating to exploitation of women and children and other issues on which countries from within the region agree to take steps for.

**c) Discussions on International Issues**

The SAARC Charter must provide for discussions on the international issues among the leaders of the member countries specially those relating to common issues of international peace and security, trade, environment and technology transfers etc. Currently, the existing structure does not allow for such discussions with the summit statements being made and written by bureaucrats well before the summit meeting. Such a move does not allow for these leaders to exchange on international matters which affect the region as a whole. Take the example of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations in Geneva. India and Pakistan, notwithstanding their own mistrust over nuclear matters had similar concerns about the proposed CTBT. Rather than working together, the two countries consciously fought shy of each other in Geneva, diluting collective strength that could have helped them.

**d) Resolution of Bilateral Disputes**

SAARC, being an emerging organization and having the potential to link the resourceful economies of South Asia, must include in its provisions to resolve the bilateral disputes peacefully and the provision of taking all the decisions unanimously without touching bilateral ones should be relaxed rather eradicated. xxi Though it would not be very easy to initiate but it should be initiated because without this step, the overall development of this organization is meaningless. The principles of respect for territorial sovereignty, political independence and non-interference should not be avoided.

**e) Role of Political Governments**

In strengthening SAARC, the role of individual governments of all the eight member countries is very important. The lack of trust and sincere efforts has marred any development in this organization. When all the steps are taken with constructive thinking and a vision for regional integration then no doubt, SAARC can go much ahead of even European Union (EU). Several wars in the region and a constant stream of allegations from most countries about illegal cross-border violations have seen hundreds of nationals being held in captivity. A SAARC fact finding team could be constituted, which could, in association with the International Red Cross, be able to visit jails and other detention centers to investigate claims.

## **ECONOMIC INITIATIVES**

**a) Monitoring of Policy Changes**

In the face of speedy trade liberalization, there is a need for the monitoring of policy changes such as the introduction of tariffs, or price controls at the regional level for greater coordination and a more effective response to the challenges of globalization.

**b) Establishment of South Asian Identity**

Establishing an identity of South Asian region in terms of quality, brand names, standards, investment regimes, and other areas where a common approach would be the benefit of all the member states.

**c) Cooperation at Smaller Sub-Regional Levels**

Cooperation at smaller sub-regional levels such as West Bengal-Bangladesh, Bangladesh-India- Nepal to develop sub-regional growth conditions.

**d) Interaction among the Citizens**

There is a need for facilitating increased interaction among the citizens of South Asia by further improving road, rail and air travel facilities. There are, for example, no easy air links between the major cities of South Asia. One has to go to Bangkok to reach Colombo from Dhaka. Similarly, Pakistanis need to go to Dubai or Bangkok to reach Kathmandu. All of these practical obstacles diminish the chances of potential for people-to-people interaction in South Asia. An increase in joint-venture initiatives in the service and educational sectors is the need of the time. Today, Bangladeshi and Nepali students and patients flock to Indian educational and medical institutions. This, no doubt, helps to bridge the cultural gap. However, it is simultaneously contributing to trade imbalance in the service sector. Further, joint-venture initiatives in these sectors can be yet another form of people-to-people cooperation.

**e) Role of India**

India must play a more trustworthy and accommodating role to build up trust among the smaller neighbors e.g road transit between Nepal and Bangladesh should be allowed to flourish.

**f) Trade and Investment**

In order to strengthen the regional economic block, trade and investments activities should be increased among the South Asian neighbors.

**g) Economic Policy Coordination**

Economic policy coordination is the need of the time to curb the rivalries in regional and international markets arising from South Asian nations and for similar trade profits and production. It is necessary to develop networks for integrated production and joint-export activities.

**h) Learning from Successes and Failures**

The South Asian countries should learn from each other's failures and successes in responding to poverty such as the micro-credit program in Bangladesh or decentralization in some states in India.

**i) Establishment of Free Trade**

Establishment of free trade areas by removing all trade tariff and non-tariffs barriers.

**j) Free Flow of Physical and Financial Capital**

Free flow of physical and financial capital and also facilitating and streamlining the movement of personnel in the region.

**k) Targeted Development**

Targeted development and uplifting of the production plus export of the weaker economies in South Asia.

**SOCIAL INITIATIVES**

**a) Interaction between People Oriented Organizations**

All types of people-oriented organizations i.e civic, political, professional and NGOs should participate to promote talks and exchanges, and contribute towards building consensus within the region for a new order in South Asia, based on recognition of the people's priorities, sharing the common heritage and culture.

**b) South Asian Identity**

There is a need to build a South Asian identity based on common customs rooted in the cultural, historical, social, and ethnic and civilization traditions. Civil society must be prioritized by the state.

**c) Culture and Media**

There should be greater exchanges of academics, poets and other cultural circles among the South Asian countries. Also, there should be easy access to each other's TV and other electronic programs. Organizing many more citizens press conferences, deliberations in public for a seminars and workshops by academics and researchers highlighting the benefits of mutual cooperation and activation of Track 1 cooperation. Encouraging exchanges through video conferences and use of Internet, facilities to strengthen the trust-building initiatives that are already in operation, actions by the media (particularly the electronic media) to bring the people of South Asia closer. Another measure with potential is to set up a SAARC Joint Commission composed of eminent historians from member countries to historically document the region, helping to remove the distortion of historical reality in South Asia.

**INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVE**

**a) Structural Changes in the Secretariat**

Structural changes are needed to make the secretariat more responsive to existing conditions as well as for quicker implementation of policies. Among these structural changes, the size of the Secretariat should be increased to deal with the wide range of issues being undertaken by SAARC under the IPA. In order to fund the increased activities of the SAARC Secretariat, all the member countries should pay, in addition to their existing contributions e.g one percent of their defence budgets as additional cess.

**b) Organizing more Meetings**

Another important structural change should be for the Secretariat to schedule into its calendar at least three summit meetings of Foreign Ministers and heads of the governments every year which would increase the level

of interaction in different fields among the member countries. There should also be more frequent meetings of ministers holding other portfolios.

**c) Greater Freedom to the Secretariat**

There should be freedom to the secretariat to prepare position papers on multilateral issues of interest in the region itself. These could initially be limited to those issues on which countries concerned give the Secretariat the permission to undertake research activity.

**d) SAARC Parliament**

In order to achieve the objective of a well-integrated economic community, SAARC Parliament can be created. As an achievable aim, the formation of SAARC Assembly can be envisaged. This assembly, to begin with, may only have deliberative and not legislative functions.

**e) Coordination with NGOs**

The Secretariat of SAARC should involve itself with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for coordinating and increasing economic and infrastructural assistance. There would, no doubt, be a great number of NGOs willing to associate themselves with the Secretariat.

**7. PROSPECTS OF SAARC**

Though the formation of SAARC is a landmark step taken by the leaders of the region, the main rationale behind its establishment is to develop a conducive environment where all nations may interact peacefully with each other, cultivate sustainable peace and promote mutual economic well-being by utilizing available resources in the region through the peaceful process of economic cooperation. Nevertheless, after more than two decades of its establishment, neither South Asian nations have been able to push the process of integration into full swing nor the organization itself has become viable enough to promote harmony and economic integration for preventing conflicts in the region. Everything with SAARC is not gloomy. In fact, the establishment of this important organization is the proof that the regional neighbors want to achieve progress and, in fact, under the IPA, the member countries have been cooperating in various social, economic and security fields. We can be optimistic about the future of SAARC because both India and Pakistan are now on the way to move ahead with peace initiatives. We can hope better that this regional organization has got enormous potential in the face of changing trends. The people of South Asia cannot be ignorant of the lost opportunities for their own prosperity and welfare. Indeed, they are well aware of the advantages of closer cooperation between the nations of South Asia. It is, therefore, time to re-invent the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizen activism, which will lead to a better environment for confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia and in turn lead to a better South Asia.

**II. 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 regional 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 to 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 ambitions 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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