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## The Future of SAARC (If any!)

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### Introduction

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or SAARC is an organization of South Asian nations founded in 1985 to facilitate economic, technological, social, and cultural development emphasizing collective self-reliance. Its seven founding members are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Meetings of heads of state are usually scheduled annually; meetings of foreign secretaries, twice annually. Headquarters are in Kathmandu, Nepal.<sup>i</sup>

This paper aims at briefly tracking SAARC's past trajectory and present developments to predict and evaluate its future prospects. What has been its history? What are its achievements? What are the challenges before South Asian cooperation? Why is the 'cooperation' necessary? And most importantly: Amid all the political chaos and inter-member enmities, what are the chances of its survival? If any!

### Challenges and Achievements

SAARC was founded in 1985 with almost similar charter as other regional groupings of cold war era, dedicated to economic, technological, social and cultural development. But it has shown little success in achieving in any of these fields. This is the reason hardly any political observer cite SAARC as a role model for regional cooperation in terms of economic or political integration.

The total population of SAARC countries is more than 1.7 billion. The Gross National Income (GNI) based on purchasing power of SAARC countries is more than \$3 trillion. These figures show huge potential, but the average share of intra-regional trade flows are about 4% in exports and 3.5% in imports. The South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed in 1993 and entered into force in 1995. It was an initiative to promote economic integration and to increase intra-regional trade. Following on from this, SAFTA, the South Asian Free Trade Area Agreement was signed at the 2004 Summit of Foreign Ministers in Islamabad and entered into force on January 1, 2006. But these agreements had little real effect on increasing trade between SAARC nations.<sup>ii</sup>

Several complications like post-colonial anxieties ('South Asia' is in itself a cold war construct), nuclear powered Islamic Republic of Pakistan, armed struggle in Afghanistan, ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, over-population, Islamic terrorism, political instability in the entire region, and the geopolitical implications of the rise of China as a regional hegemon has made its success more difficult.

Despite these challenges, some scholars feel that in view of the difficult circumstances which prevailed at the time of the association's establishment, "it is a significant step forward that the region's players will at least sit down together and enter into discussions". So, it can be said that SAARC has provided a platform to discuss problems, ideas and possible solutions – at least in theory - to nations of one of the politically most unstable regions on the globe.<sup>iii</sup> SAARC summits have also provided a framework for all the sides to hold discussions and resolve disputes – something which is important for the alliance and for the whole region.

## The Way Forward

There are, clearly, a lot of obstacles in the path of a strong and integrated South Asian community. Similarly, there can be many ways and measures which, scholars argue, can be employed to facilitate the cooperation among South Asian nations. Some of them which according to the writer are worth discussing, are as follows-

**India as *The Saviour*.** Rajen Harshe, argues that South Asia is an "Indo-centric region" where every other country shares social, cultural and religious similarities with no other country, except India. Hence, he advocates **Gujral doctrine** of foreign policy, which is based upon the principle of 'non reciprocity', in order to achieve better relations with neighbours and to secure peace in South Asia. Historically, India has acted as a 'big brother' in the region and not employed this principle to the fullest.<sup>iv</sup>

Theoretically speaking, it should be employed, but this principle seems ineffective when dealing with the military dominated Pakistani State. Indo-Pak enmity has been the major stumbling block in the way of an integrated and stable South Asia. And the root cause of this relation is the Military rule in Pakistan which does not want its State-control weakened and is ideologically driven to oppose and wound India. So, every effort by India to bridge the political gap has been met by terrorist attacks, wars and what-not. Recent example can be Pathankot terrorist attack, which can be seen as a reaction to increasing informal pleasantries between Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers from the time PM Modi invited all the SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony. In my opinion, this policy is a failed experiment and cannot be a way to integrated South Asia.

**More Economic Integration.** Every major regional grouping (be it ASEAN, EU) started as an economic project for a facilitating regional trade. Liberal theorists of IR also argue for free and open markets as a sure shot way of bettering inter-national cooperation. But, SAARC countries, despite their efforts could not improve in this field.

Still, as the old saying goes, we should "look at the bright side". South Asian region has a huge economic potential with the world's fourth largest economy- India, emerging consumer markets, huge workforce and most importantly, region's 'geo-economic' advantage of being the 'crown of Indian Ocean'. And, we are looking at warming of relations between its members through the means of communication and technology, transportation, developmental projects etc., but this inter-linkage & interdependence are not to be accrued to South Asian region as a whole. Individual members are leading this change without the overarching organizational umbrella of SAARC.

**Common Enemy: Global Warming.** The global environmental threat is challenging living conditions as well as the political discourse of international politics. In recent decades, environment has emerged as a political issue, in addition to its social and natural implications. And with huge populations, diverse geographies, industrializing developing nations and political instability, South Asia is at the centre of the climate discussion. South Asia is experiencing natural calamities like floods and cyclones, depleting resources, rising pollution levels, threat to coastal population with rising sea levels and, what some scholars define as, the ‘securitisation’<sup>v</sup> of environment. So, South Asian cooperation can be said to be a necessity in this era of *anthropocene*.<sup>vi</sup> Hence, it can and should be a reason for livening of SAARC.

**China as a member.** Nepal proposed in 2010 for full membership of China, which presently has an observer status, but India vetoed it down. The inclusion of China can have many positive implications for the organizations viz. members could balance out India’s strength within SAARC, it could provide an impetus to economic growth of region, and the politico-economic clout of the grouping would substantially rise due the sheer size of Chinese economy.

However, China’s exponential economic rise, expansionist tendencies, military prowess and ‘debt trap’ diplomacy haunts many countries, mainly India. Because of these reasons the inclusion of China in SAARC seems very unlikely, at least in the near future.

**SAARC minus Pakistan.** Some scholars argue that SAARC minus Pakistan can be an alternative, as its provocations towards India bogs down SAARC.<sup>vii</sup> But we cannot forget that the most crucial issue of the region is terrorism and being its perpetrator Pakistan is at the core of the problem. Engaging with Pakistan is necessary for tackling the demon of terrorism. BIMSTEC and Indian Ocean Rim Organization are some viable regional alternatives that have been prioritized by the Modi Government in the past few years.

## Conclusion

Many scholars argue that SAARC is a *dead* entity, or even a ‘Zombie’. It signifies that though SAARC is alive in the *papers* but its existence serves no purpose as an organization. The Eighteenth SAARC Summit was held in Kathmandu seven years ago. The Nineteenth SAARC Summit (2016) was to be organized in Islamabad, but following the Pathankot airbase attack and Uri terror attack (2016) by Pakistan based Islamist terror outfits, India along with other members decided to not attend the Summit. There has been no SAARC summit after 2014. After BJP’s victory in 2014 general election, Narendra Modi invited all the SAARC State Heads to his Swearing-in-ceremony. But in 2019, he invited the BIMSTEC member State Heads. This is a welcome shift in India’s foreign policy establishment.

Surprisingly, A. G. Noorani holds India responsible for “killing” SAARC.<sup>viii</sup> Five years back, citing cross-border terrorism perpetrated by Pakistan, PM Modi indicated that it is difficult to proceed with SAARC in these circumstances.<sup>ix</sup> SAARC is actually a glaring example of “retarded regionalism” and is dying a slow death with no efforts for its revival.<sup>x</sup> Noted scholar C. Raja Mohan, in a recent article, suggests India to finally “move on” because “the SAARC project”, he feels, “has lost all steam”.<sup>xi</sup> And, I think India is moving forward and looking towards better alternatives with betterment of relations with ASEAN and EU, engaging with groupings like BIMSTEC, BBIN and ‘Quad’ of India, USA, Japan & Australia and ‘informal’ as well as formal arrangements with China, Russia and Central Asian countries. And, with the absence of any interest of the dominant member of the region-India- in the strengthening of the grouping, other members are also ‘moving on’. Still, how can India think of fulfilling its Indo-Pacific ambitions without first taking care of its immediate neighborhood first.<sup>xii</sup>

Delhi has successfully de-hyphenated its relation with Islamabad. It has become a debt ridden state and a virtual colony of People's Republic of China. It is on the verge of being 'black-listed' by FATF. The focus of Delhi has drastically shifted towards the aggressive Beijing. Pakistan is, for now, completely out of the picture. Afghanistan State has been taken over by a radical Islamist terrorist organization Taliban. How these political developments will play out in the future? No one knows. But SAARC is, literally, on the death bed with very little or no chance of survival. But the question remains: Is SAARC expendable? May be, yes. But, should the larger *Jambudvīpa* region be ignored? And the answer is a big NO!

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