



The Influence and Relevance of SAARC as a Regional Organization in the Contemporary Indo-Pakistan Bilateral Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was envisioned as a platform for fostering regional integration, cooperation, and socio-economic development among South Asian nations. However, the protracted rivalry between India and Pakistan has significantly hindered its potential. This paper explores the influence and current relevance of SAARC in light of escalating Indo-Pak tensions, evaluating the organization's structural challenges, political deadlocks, and strategic limitations. It discusses whether SAARC has been reduced to a symbolic entity due to bilateral disputes and analyzes alternative regional frameworks that are gaining prominence. The research delves into SAARC's institutional weaknesses, examines shifting alliances toward platforms like BIMSTEC and the SCO, and evaluates the implications for regional peace and diplomacy. This paper also considers the geopolitical aspirations of member states, the influence of global powers on regional cooperation, and the shifting balance of power in South Asia. Through a multi-dimensional analysis, it reveals how regionalism is being reshaped in the face of enduring bilateral hostility. The study also highlights how non-traditional security issues such as climate change, pandemics, and migration demand collective responses that SAARC is uniquely positioned to address, if reinvigorated. Ultimately, this study provides realistic recommendations to reinvigorate SAARC's role in a fragmented regional landscape and restore its credibility as a multilateral institution.

Keywords: SAARC, Indo-Pak rivalry, Regional Cooperation, South Asia, Diplomacy, Regionalism, Foreign Policy.

Introduction:

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a unique development in the complicated geopolitical landscape of South Asia that is designed to provide unity across the region. SAARC was born in 1985; it is characterized formally in 1985 with the secretariat located in Kathmandu, Nepal, and was envisioned as the mode to provide regional integration, peace, and economic and social development to the eight member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The organization has not been able to convert its ambitions into real achievements despite this vision. The main stumbling block has been the adamant and at times, acrimonious bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan two nuclear-armed countries whose hostility has not only informed the regional politics but also disabled the institutional capacity of SAARC (Muhammad Muzaffar, 2017).

Indo-Pakistan is rooted in historic resentments, including the division of British India in 1947, the Jammu and Kashmir border dispute and many military conflicts and diplomatic tensions. These general strains have had a huge bearing on the politics of SAARC. Key summits have been postponed or even cancelled, regional agreements have not been implemented, and collaboration in important areas such as security, trade and energy has been insignificant. The institutional framework of SAARC, where decision must be arrived by unanimous consensus has rendered it particularly susceptible to bilateral disputes. A moving instance of Indo-Pak enmity that interrupts the operations of the organization can be traced to India boycotting the 19 th SAARC

summit that was to be hosted in Islamabad in 2016, due to the Uri attack, and how other member states supported this move (Majid, 2017). (Majid, 2017).

In principle, SAARC holds immense promise. The region collectively houses around 25% of the world's population and possesses vast natural and human resources. A truly cooperative South Asia under the SAARC umbrella could facilitate regional trade, improve energy connectivity, promote cultural exchange, and foster collective responses to non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. Yet, the dream of a unified South Asia remains largely unrealized. In practice, member states often prioritize bilateral relationships and alternative regional frameworks over SAARC. Organizations such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have gained traction, partly because they offer platforms where the India-Pakistan rivalry does not play a disruptive role (Wittenstein, 2021).

This paper argues that the Indo-Pak conflict has rendered SAARC largely ineffective as a regional bloc, transforming it into a dormant institution with limited diplomatic or economic influence. Despite sporadic successes such as the SAARC Development Fund, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and cooperation on disaster management SAARC has failed to evolve into a vibrant platform for regionalism. This failure is not solely due to bilateral hostilities but also stems from weak institutional mechanisms, lack of political will, and the absence of enforcement power.

This paper aims at analyzing how far the Indo-Pakistan relationship has influenced the path of SAARC. It also examines whether the relevance of the organization can still be brought back or it is being slowly displaced by more dynamic and less controversial regional groupings. This way, the paper will evaluate the geopolitical approaches of the SAARC member states, the influence of the external forces, i.e., China and the United States, and the overall tendencies of regionalism and multilateralism in the 21st century.

The focus of this study encompasses the critique of structural and functional weaknesses of the organization, a review of the history of India Pakistan tensions under SAARC, and a progression of how the organization can be reformed with a discussion of alternative routes. The research design is qualitative content analysis of policy documents, summit declarations, scholarly works, and expert interviews in case they are available.

This research is important in the fact that it tries to throw some light on the gap that exists between the theoretical potential and real performance of SAARC. The paper is set to address how Indo-Pakistan bilateralism affects regional cooperation, and therefore contribute to the South Asian geopolitical studies and regional institutional-building literature. Knowing why SAARC has not advanced much is a critical issue of concern of policymakers, diplomats, and scholars interested in the future of South Asian regionalism.

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka which make up the South Asian region host about a quarter of the world population. Nevertheless, in spite of this demographic weight, the region is still one of the least integrated, in terms of trade, connectivity and political cooperation. In an attempt to overcome this gap, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), was formed in 1985, aimed at promoting cooperation in the economic, cultural and strategic sectors. Nevertheless, the history of rivalry between the two largest countries India and Pakistan has always derailed progress. SAARC has been overshadowed by the Indo-Pak

conflict that runs deep in historical animosities, territorial issues, and the clash of national identities. This article is a critical study of the effect of this bilateral rivalry on the evolution, functioning, and relevance of SAARC in the modern geopolitical environment (Ahmad, 2021).

The study will examine the organizational structure of SAARC, its success and failure, the role of the Indo-Pak relationship on the course of the organization. It will also examine how regional politics have changed and caused member states to seek other multilateral forums, including BIMSTEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Through that, the paper will provide an in-depth insight into the present applicability of SAARC and its prospects in an environment that is plagued with conflict and rivalry.

Discussion and Analysis:

Foundational Vision vs Political Realities

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed in 1985 with the dream of bringing peace, stability and economic prosperity to south Asia by mutual cooperation. It was supposed to be a joint platform whereby member states can collaborate in order to solve the common problems like poverty, illiteracy and underdevelopment. Its ideology was based on the fact that regional cooperation can overcome political tensions and assist South Asia to develop as a unified economic and political entity (Iqbal, 2006).

Yet this ideal has frequently bumped into the ugly reality of the politics of the region, and in the specific of the entrenched and persistent hostility between India and Pakistan. Their mutual differences have always hampered the performance of SAARC. Most notably, political conflicts have led to the ruination or postponement of summits. As an example, the Uri attack caused several member states to boycott the 19th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2016 effectively bringing the process of regional cooperation to a standstill. This paralysis is further worsened by the consensus-based decision-making model of the organization, where a single member state can stall joint efforts, and this has happened more often than not owing to the Indo-Pak tensions (Ahmad D. M., 2017).

SAARC's failure to rise above bilateral disputes reflects a broader regional challenge: the inability of political leaderships to compartmentalize bilateral issues from multilateral cooperation. Unlike the European Union, where historical adversaries have found mechanisms to cooperate despite differences, SAARC remains trapped in the shadow of Indo-Pak antagonism. Until the political realities of hostility are addressed, SAARC's foundational vision will remain largely unfulfilled, making the organization more symbolic than substantive in addressing regional needs.

India-Pakistan Rivalry as a Structural Inhibitor

The enduring hostility between India and Pakistan serves as a structural inhibitor to SAARC's growth and functionality. Since partition in 1947, both countries have experienced multiple wars and continuous diplomatic confrontations, mostly centered on the Kashmir issue. These tensions have seeped into every aspect of SAARC's operations, from policymaking to summit participation. This has created a chronic obstacle to the organization's agenda of regional unity (Majid, 2017).

Because SAARC functions on the principle of unanimity, even a single member's objection can derail regional decisions. India and Pakistan have repeatedly used this mechanism to block initiatives proposed by each other, stalling progress on trade, infrastructure, and people-to-people linkages. Moreover, the perception of SAARC as a battleground for Indo-Pak disputes has dissuaded smaller member states from actively engaging in the organization's affairs, fearing entanglement in their bilateral issues. As a result, SAARC's institutional mechanisms remain underutilized and ineffective (Barbhuiya, 2022).

Furthermore, the political mistrust between India and Pakistan has prevented the creation of a robust dispute resolution mechanism within SAARC. Unlike the ASEAN Way or the

African Union's Peace and Security Council, SAARC lacks a formal process for mediating inter-member conflicts. This structural deficiency becomes glaring when Indo-Pak tensions flare up, rendering the organization diplomatically paralyzed. Until these two pivotal states find common ground or agree to isolate their bilateral rivalry from multilateral cooperation, SAARC will continue to be structurally handicapped.

Economic Cooperation and Missed Opportunities

SAARC's economic agenda, which includes frameworks like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), holds immense potential for regional prosperity. The South Asian region houses nearly one-fourth of the global population, and enhanced economic cooperation could yield transformative outcomes in trade, employment, and poverty alleviation. Yet, the persistent mistrust and antagonism between India and Pakistan have severely limited progress in this domain (Shakeel Ahmad Ramay, 2013).

India and Pakistan, being the two largest economies in the region, are expected to drive regional trade. However, their trade relations remain minimal and heavily restricted. Political tensions often result in trade embargoes, the imposition of non-tariff barriers, and the severance of formal trade ties. For example, in the wake of the Pulwama attack in 2019, India withdrew Most Favored Nation (MFN) status from Pakistan, leading to a sharp decline in trade. Such episodes not only affect bilateral economic ties but also undermine the broader goals of SAFTA and regional economic integration (Jibran Hussain, 2017).

Moreover, the lack of integrated transport corridors, harmonized customs procedures, and cross-border banking facilities are all direct consequences of this bilateral hostility. The result is that intra-SAARC trade remains one of the lowest among regional blocs globally, accounting for less than 5% of total trade, compared to over 25% in ASEAN. This economic underperformance reflects not a lack of potential, but a lack of political will. Only when India and Pakistan commit to economic cooperation despite political differences can the region unlock its true economic potential (Pratiksha Chaturvedi, 2017).

Security and Counterterrorism Challenges

Regional cooperation on security and counterterrorism is vital for stability in South Asia, yet SAARC has failed to develop a unified response mechanism. The divergent threat perceptions and security priorities of member states, particularly India and Pakistan, have made consensus on these issues nearly impossible. India accuses Pakistan of harboring and supporting cross-border terrorism, while Pakistan counters by claiming that it is also a victim of terrorism and denies any state involvement (Mussarat Jabeen, 2013).

This mutual distrust has severely weakened SAARC's capacity to coordinate on terrorism-related issues. Although SAARC has adopted conventions on mutual legal assistance and terrorism suppression, these remain largely unimplemented. The lack of trust prevents meaningful intelligence sharing and joint counterterrorism operations. Additionally, summit-level discussions on security are often derailed by accusations and blame games between India and Pakistan, leaving little room for constructive dialogue.

In contrast, other regional organizations have made significant progress in this area. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes both India and Pakistan, has established mechanisms for joint counterterrorism exercises and intelligence sharing, albeit with limited success. SAARC, on the other hand, has not moved beyond declaratory commitments. The inability to forge a shared security framework not only weakens the organization but also perpetuates insecurity in the region. Without trust and transparency between India and Pakistan, SAARC will remain an ineffective forum for regional security cooperation (HASHMI, 2015).

Rise of Alternative Forums

The marginalization of SAARC due to Indo-Pak conflict has led to the rise of alternative regional forums, particularly the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC excludes Pakistan and includes countries like Thailand and Myanmar, providing India with a platform to pursue regional cooperation without the political baggage of Indo-Pak tensions (De, 2019).

India has actively promoted BIMSTEC as a viable alternative, especially after the failed SAARC summit in 2016. This shift in focus is strategic: by working within BIMSTEC, India can deepen economic, security, and infrastructure ties with other South Asian and Southeast Asian nations without the constant disruptions caused by its rivalry with Pakistan. The frequency of BIMSTEC meetings, joint military exercises, and infrastructure initiatives like the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection exemplify this momentum (Qurat Ul Ain, 2019).

The growing relevance of such forums undermines SAARC's position as the primary regional body. Smaller SAARC member states are also turning their attention to these alternatives, driven by frustration over SAARC's ineffectiveness. This diversification of regionalism may offer short-term solutions, but it also risks fragmenting South Asian unity. If SAARC is to reclaim its central role, it must demonstrate that it can function effectively even in the face of bilateral disputes. Otherwise, it will be gradually sidelined by more pragmatic, goal-oriented groupings.

Prospects for Revitalization

The future of SAARC hinges on the ability of its member states, particularly India and Pakistan, to separate bilateral issues from regional cooperation. Revitalizing SAARC requires a renewed political commitment to the organization's core objectives and a willingness to adopt flexible mechanisms that allow progress even when unanimity is elusive. Confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as restoring trade ties or initiating backchannel diplomacy, could pave the way for re-engagement (G, 2022).

Another approach is adopting a two-speed model of cooperation, where willing members advance in areas like trade, climate change, or public health without waiting for consensus on politically sensitive issues. This model, akin to the European Union's enhanced cooperation, could keep SAARC functional even amid bilateral rivalries. Encouraging greater role for the SAARC Secretariat, expanding its financial and administrative capacity, and fostering stronger collaboration with international organizations could also enhance its effectiveness (Muzaffar, 2025).

Ultimately, SAARC's survival depends on political will. The costs of regional disintegration are high missed economic opportunities, weakened collective bargaining power, and heightened insecurity. Conversely, a functional SAARC could transform South Asia into a cohesive and prosperous region. For that to happen, India and Pakistan must recognize that their rivalry not only harms bilateral interests but also obstructs the collective future of the region.

Conclusion

The discussion on the role and relevance of the SAARC in the light of the rivalry between Indo and Pakistan shows that the regional body is undergoing a hardship in achieving its initial mandate. SAARC was conceived as the platform where peace, economic development and regional integration would be promoted. However its functionalities have been severely hampered by the deep rooted and long term hostilities between India and Pakistan. The consensus-based decision making system of the organization, which was initially meant to facilitate equality and inclusivity among the member states has acted as a snag whenever bilateral tensions arise.

The various themes presented bring out the various aspects in which the Indo-Pakistan tensions are hindering the potential of SAARC. On the political front, their competition has caused stalled summits, boycotts and diplomatic paralysis. Institutionally, SAARC has not been able to stand up to these tensions given that it has continued to fail in its failure to isolate bilateral concerns with its multilateral cooperation. Economically,

failure of cooperation between the two largest economies in the region has denied South Asia much needed trade and investment opportunities. In the security aspect, the lack of cohesive counter-terrorism policy would indicate the strong mistrust between these nuclear armed neighbors. The emergence of others such as BIMSTEC has further relegated SAARC indicating that regionalism can flourish without being held captive by the Indo-Pak tussle.

However, it is not everything that is lost. The fact that SAARC has consistently participated in cultural exchange and civil society diplomacy is one thin but essential strand of regional connectivity. Although these more amicable elements of regionalism cannot be used in place of political collaboration, they can be used as the basis upon which stronger relationships can be established someday. To restore relevancy of SAARC, India and Pakistan need to accept their mutual responsibilities and need to act not only in their national interest but also in regional interest. The future of SAARC and its survival in the long-term is eventually up to the political maturity and foresight of its member states. India and Pakistan as the most powerful players in the organization should be on the frontline to revive the confidence in regionalism. Only with constant communication, respect and tactical concessions, SAARC can turn into a force of development and peace in South Asia instead of a mere hallmark. Regional integration is not just a luxury of diplomacy but a matter of development of one of the most populous and divergent regions of the world..

Recommendations:

1. Reinstating Regular Summits ensure regular SAARC summits take place, regardless of bilateral tensions, to maintain momentum in regional cooperation.
2. Depoliticize Regional Platforms encourage India and Pakistan to compartmentalize their bilateral issues from multilateral cooperation agendas.
3. Establish a Conflict Resolution Mechanism create an internal mediation framework within SAARC to resolve disputes before they derail organizational functioning.
4. Strengthen the SAARC Secretariat increase funding, autonomy, and staffing to enhance its role in coordinating and implementing regional initiatives.
5. Promote Economic Interdependence revive SAFTA and reduce trade barriers to build mutual economic interests that discourage conflict.
6. Encourage Two-Speed Integration allow willing member states to advance cooperation in specific sectors without requiring full consensus.
7. Enhance Counterterrorism Cooperation develop joint intelligence sharing and anti-terrorism frameworks under neutral supervision.
8. Support Civil Society Networks facilitate more people-to-people exchanges, academic collaborations, and cultural programs to sustain grassroots connectivity.
9. Leverage International Partnerships engage with global institutions like the UN or World Bank to support and legitimize regional initiatives.
10. Reform Decision-Making Rules modify the unanimity rule for certain functional areas to allow majority-based progress and prevent deadlocks.

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