

A Pragmatic Study on India's SAARC Policy Development

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ABSTRACT

The regional forum SAARC has a lot of promise, but without solid bilateral ties, this potential for regional collaboration cannot be realized. Given the inherent asymmetry in the eight-member nations' geographical, economic, and strategic aspects, genuine cooperation can only occur when member nations have mutual trust and are willing to resolve & transcend bilateral discrepancies and apprehensions for the benefit of their people. Due to a variety of reasons, India bears a significant share of the blame in this regard. The most significant aspect is that, with the exception of the Maldives and Afghanistan, India is the only country that borders every SAARC nation. This geographic fact has the consequence that India must assist in developing robust economic ties with its neighbors. More significantly, India should address the problems that the trading partners have been having with India regarding border commerce and transit infrastructure. While preferential economic agreements like SAPTA would be profitable for all parties involved, it should be recognized that India can gain a lot by enhancing bilateral ties.

Despite being inspired by the success of other regional organizations like the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has lagged far behind. The economic situation on the Indian subcontinent is hopeless, even though the security situation in the region is cause for alarm. India's path through the SAARC has been marked by highs and lows, with maybe more lows than highs; this may have influenced India's perspective on the organization and its strategy. This article has attempted to analyze some aspects of the interactions between India and the SAARC and the development of India's policies on the SAARC.

1. Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was founded on December 8, 1985, and its first summit was appropriately held in Dhaka. This was done in recognition of the significant initiative that Bangladesh had taken to establish this regional organization to make the region more secure, peaceful, and prosperous. In general, the smaller states of the subcontinent have raved about it. India and Pakistan, two of the most populous and powerful nations on the subcontinent, were initially hesitant to participate, but they eventually came on board. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has some admirable goals, and there are reasonable hopes for its future. However, the activities and results accomplished to this point have not even come close to meeting expectations.^[1]

Initially, India and Pakistan both held skepticism toward the SAARC; however, the reasons behind these feelings were distinct. Pakistan was concerned that India would eventually take control of it. India is also concerned that other member states with fewer resources than it does would band together against it and try to marginalize it. It was also concerned that it would lose the ability to make choices and act independently in security and foreign policies if it lost its independence.^[2] However, New Delhi made certain that the SAARC charter included the following provisions: decisions will be made based on unanimity, and bilateral and contentious topics will not be presented in SAARC Forums. Because of these restrictions, the gathering has been spared much potential harm.

2. An Attempt at Regional Diplomacy:

India is hardly a novice regarding the diplomacy of regionalism that characterizes SAARC. An advocate and practitioner of this philosophy were Jawaharlal Nehru, who served as India's first Prime Minister. However, there is a major gap between his diplomacy of regionalism and the one that New Delhi has been pursuing since the middle of the 1980s. Specifically, this gap can be seen as a divergence in approach. In Nehru's mind, the term region referred to all of Asia, including Afro-Asia. His "regionalism" was predominately "political and ideological," and it had very little to do with the practical interests of the country.^[3]

On the other hand, the contemporary type of regionalism, which is predominately strategic, seeks to achieve economic and security interests. Nehru was opposed to the concept of "collective security," which he believed to be synonymous with "bloc" politics and military coalitions. There is no such negative connotation associated with security concerning SAARC. The idea of "Cooperative Security" is buried deep inside it. On the other hand, its track record in significant security areas, such as anti-terrorist efforts and maritime security, has been unsatisfactory.^[5] New Delhi appears to have been motivated to pursue alternative diplomacy models due to its dissatisfaction with the SAARC. These models include extended regionalism, which is represented by the Look East Act, East, look west, and Indian Ocean strategy, and sub-regionalism, which is represented by the BBIN and BMSTEC initiatives.

3. Factors Weakening the Indo-Pakistani Peace:

Although India and Pakistan may have eventually overcome their early apprehensions and concerns regarding the SAARC, the fact that their conflict still rages on has been detrimental to the organization's progress. It has resulted in low-level animosity, mistrust, and divisiveness among the member states of SAARC, significantly weakening the organization.

On multiple occasions, Pakistan has attempted to bring up the Kashmir problem at the SAARC meeting. Although this would constitute a violation of the SAARC charter, Pakistan's position is that the SAARC will inevitably fail if disagreements between member states are not resolved.^[5] They have not endorsed other members' positions on this matter. On the other hand, other members have shown their support for India's denunciation of cross-border terrorism, which can be interpreted as an indirect jab at Pakistan because they, too, have been victims of terrorism or are exposed to its effects.

Incorporation and interconnection are essential to the process of development. In today's increasingly globalized society, it is essential to communicate with people and maintain an open mindset. Within the SAARC, India has put forward many different connection suggestions. During the summit that took place in Kathmandu in 2014, India suggested interstate connections through land, water, and air. These ideas were successful in garnering the backing of other members, except for Pakistan, which is concerned about connectivity. 3 It takes a stance against the merger of SAARC. The policy of open commerce is currently in effect. It is the most important component of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Even as far back as 1996, India made an offer to Pakistan to grant it the Most Favored Nation (MFN) title. However, Pakistan has not yet shown any sign of reciprocity. Envy and fear motivate Pakistan's actions rather than a desire to help its neighbors.^[6]

India has turned to sub-nationalism to overcome the obstacles Pakistan poses to the integration and connectivity of SAARC. This led to the foundation of two organizations, BBIN and BIMSTEC. The Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal Economic Network (BBIN), which aims to enhance commerce, transit, and connection among its member states, consists of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal (the land area of the subcontinent except for Pakistan and Afghanistan). Seven countries make up the BIMSTEC, and India is one of them. These countries are spread over South Asia and Southeast Asia. India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are the five countries that make up South Asia's delegation.

In comparison, Myanmar and Thailand are the two countries that makeup South East Asia's delegation. In the last week of August 2018, Kathmandu played host to the fourth and most recent BIMSTREC summit. During the summit, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, remarked that BIMSTEC has become the "meeting place of India's Neighborhood Act East Policies." 4 The conference emphasized two themes: connection and the fight against terrorism. In addition to decrying terrorism in all of its forms and expressions, it called for the identifying and holding accountable of states and non-state entities that encourage, support, or finance terrorism, provide sanctuaries to terrorists, and falsely extol the virtues of terrorists.^[7] In addition, it called for the condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and incarnations.

In addition to this decision, it was proposed to create the BIMSTEC grid interlink to improve energy cooperation among the member states. The Prime Minister of Nepal, K. P. Sharma Oli, stated during the BIMSTEC conference that the Kathmandu declaration envisioned the objective of establishing a peaceful, economic, and environmentally sustainable Bay of Bengal area.^[8]

To keep the peace and security in the region, which is one of the primary goals of the regional organization, the member states agree to work out their differences amicably and refrain from resorting to violence. In this regard, the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are two of the most successful regional organizations. The SAARC charter, on the other hand, does not include this commitment on behalf of member nations. Despite India's repeated proposals for a "No War Pact," Pakistan has not yet agreed to sign the document. Naturally, this has led to skepticism about Pakistan's dedication to maintaining peace in the region.^[9]

4. The China Aspect:

China's impact on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has grown recently. After the formation of SAARC, China did not become a member of the organization for a good number of years. However, due to its better relations with certain SAARC members, it became more confident in joining it. Since the early 1960s, Pakistan has been one of the United States' most dependable friends. In recent years, many other South Asian countries, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, has moved toward China in increasingly greater proximity. China has successfully lured these nations into its sphere of influence by leveraging its financial might by providing significant financial aid in grants and loans, mostly to foster infrastructure growth in these nations.^[10] In this respect, India is incapable of competing with it. Because of their shared hatred against India, China and a few other member states of SAARC have become closer in recent years. These member states reject what they see to be India's hegemonic ambitions.

In 2005, during the summit in Kathmandu, India proposed that Afghanistan should be granted full membership in the SAARC due to its close closeness to the subcontinent in terms of geography, history, and culture. Taking advantage of this window of opportunity, Pakistan suggested that China be granted 'Observer' status. Each of the suggestions was given the green light. In this game of "one-upmanship," India successfully recruited the United States to participate as an "Observer." Its strategy of Pakistan to pit China against India was unsuccessful since India was able to get the United States to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which can compete with China within it. India has effectively countered Pakistan and its allies Nepal and Sri Lanka's efforts to have China admitted as a full member of the SAARC.^[11]

5. Delay in the Holding of Summits:

On December 8, 1985, the inaugural meeting of the SAARC summit took place. The charter for SAARC calls for the organization to convene at least one summit every year. Therefore, at least 33 summits should have occurred as of this point. However, as of yet, there have only been 18 summits

held, and there is a great deal of uncertainty over the next peak. This gap has been caused by the postponing or cancellation of summits, which, in turn, have been caused by various circumstances, including challenges faced by the host nation, political unrest, or natural disasters in a member country.^[12]

After a disagreement with India over Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) deployed to Sri Lanka's North East per an agreement between the two nations in 1987, Sri Lanka opted out of hosting the SAARC summit in 1989. Although Colombo had requested it, the IPKF withdrawal was delayed, which enraged it to an extreme degree.

In November 1991, when the sixth SAARC summit was supposed to take place in Colombo, it had to be rescheduled since the King of Bhutan refused to travel there due to the widespread unrest in his nation. If a representative of Bhutan's King could make it to the summit, many additional countries expressed interest in holding it according to its original schedule.^[13] On the other hand, India was adamant that there could be no SAARC summit held without either the head of state or the head of government of any member state. However, following a deferral of one month, there is a better chance of convincing the King of Bhutan to attend the summit.

As a result of the Indo-Pak disagreement, the Kargil War in the middle of 1999, the terrorist attacks on India's Parliament on December 13, 2001, and the city of Mumbai on November 26, 2008, and subsequent terror attacks in the states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, the SAARC summits were unable to take place for many years, including 1992, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2015, 2016, and 2017.^[14] This was primarily because of these events. The summit that was supposed to take place in Dhaka in 2005 was postponed not once but twice; the first time, it was because of a tsunami that struck that country, and the second time, it was due to an emergency in Nepal. Because of the upcoming national elections in 2008, the Maldives decided against hosting the summit that year. There is significant unpredictability surrounding the 19th SAARC summit, which was supposed to take place in Islamabad in November 2016. The fact that India and three other member states, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, decided to "boycott" the event meant that it could not go through as planned. They cited Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorist organizations, Islamic extremism, and Pakistan's intervention in the internal affairs of member states as the reasons for their boycott. Pakistan, which has accused India of "scuttling" the scheduled 19th SAARC summit to be held in Islamabad, is attempting to resurrect it with the help of Nepal, the current SAARC Chairman, and Sri Lanka. It has not yet been responded to by India or any other member states.^[15]

6. India's Alternatives and Available Possibilities:

It is unclear if the SAARC, which has always been a feeble organization, needs to be revitalized because it has always been weak or because it has steadily become weaker over time and now needs to be revitalized.^[16] While we do not wish to downplay the significance of what the SAARC and its member states ought to accomplish, this article will focus on what India ought to or might do to make the organization more powerful and efficient.

1. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has various goals. While they

are all significant, India, considering its resources, skills, and capabilities, should focus on only a few selected priority areas in which it can make a significant contribution. Issues about commerce, investments, peace and safety, the fight against terrorism, cultural preservation, and tourism must receive top priority.

2. India has been accused of acting like "hegemony" and meddling in the domestic affairs of other member states, both of which are grounds for criticism. This criticism is, to some extent, diminishing India's appeal in these countries and making it more challenging for India to fulfill the position of a leader within the SAARC.
3. There is a possibility that the connection between Pakistan and China would provide India with a significant challenge within the SAARC. To address the obstructionism of Pakistan, that country should contribute considerably to the development and consolidation of sub-regional groupings such as BBIN and BIMSTEC. In addition, it should strategically use its linkages with other countries, such as the United States and Japan, to compete with China.

7. Conclusion:

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been a bust, and one of the primary reasons for this is the war between India and Pakistan. Their "Cold War" has contaminated it in some way. They have the propensity to see the programs and operations of SAARC from the perspective of their bilateral issues. They frequently ignore the region's interests and requirements because they are preoccupied with playing a game of one-upmanship with one another. The ongoing conflict between the Big Two has rendered the SAARC incapable of doing its duties effectively.

Even though it is not particularly significant at the moment, intra-SAARC trade has significant untapped potential. The lack of cooperation from Pakistan, which only has a short-term perspective, poses a significant barrier to expanding commerce among the member states. It is putting a major roadblock in the way of SAARC's ambitions for connectivity and integration. Threats from inside and beyond the subcontinent can compromise the region's ability to maintain its security. Both India and Pakistan are placing the blame for their respective countries' struggles with insurgency and militancy on the other country. China is fanning conflict on its borders with India and Bhutan. At the same time, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) does not include a provision for "collective security," and the hope for "cooperative security" has shown to be unfounded.

China's plans and actions in the territory have been closely monitored by India, which has maintained a vigilant vigilance. Despite several of its members supporting the idea, it is against China as a member of SAARC. The connection between China and Pakistan not only poses a danger to India but also has the potential to create significant difficulties for the regional organization. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could fall prey to China's "divide and rule" approach. India has been driven toward sub-regionalism due to Pakistan's antagonism and its mischief. It seeks alternative structures, such as BBIN and BIMSTEC, to

foster peace and development in South Asia. Both China and Pakistan are working toward the goal of weakening and dividing BIMSTEC. To add insult to injury, Nepal has decided to participate in a joint military exercise with China from September 17 to the 28th, even though it withdrew from a BIMSTEC-led military drill in Pune scheduled to take place from September 10 to the 16th at the very last minute.

Members of SAARC haven't been able to adequately integrate and make use of possibilities even after 30-plus years of existence. The lack of commerce between the two biggest partners, India and Pakistan, is the primary cause of the SAARC integration's delayed development. Getting rid of the friction between them should be the first priority for the success of SAARC. The creation of supply networks is also crucial. In addition to tariff rates & market access, SAARC should

implement trade facilitation measures to strengthen commercial linkages. Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) should also be eliminated in South Asian nations to allow unrestricted commerce. The goals of increasing regional commerce, investment, and supply chain growth would undoubtedly be achieved with cooperation in customs processes and other rules. There is a proposal to establish a SAARC visa regime that envisions liberal multi-entry permits similar to the Schengen visa system used by the European Union to guarantee that all nationals of SAARC member nations may travel freely in South Asia to improve people-to-people connections. Modi wants to unite the SAARC members by using all of India's advantages. The fight against poverty can only be won on these conditions, regardless of the field being used: agriculture, information technology, education, or space technology.

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