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## **Regional organization: The ineffective role of SAARC in building peace among the member states**

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### **Abstract**

Regional and International Organizations have become a significant phenomenon in the arena of international politics. Liberalized and globalized world has further made modern nation-states become a part of global and regional organizations to pursue or fulfill their economic aspirations. The need to have a regional organization in South Asia was felt during the eighties. The agreement between seven South Asian regional states-India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives (Afghanistan joined in 2007) led to the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). SAARC was established to promote cooperation in economic, socio-cultural, and scientific fields. This has also opened several new opportunities in the South Asian region. The Idea of SAARC was relevant, but it has not been able to prosper as it has to be. This study intends to focus on where SAARC is playing its ineffective role in building peace among member states and the region.

Further, this study will also attempt to show the relevance of SAARC in the region. However, the main focus of the study will remain to identify the significant obstacle and hindrances of SAARC by which this organization is becoming irrelevant in the region. Finally, this study will point out few suggestions for the transformation of SAARC. Hopefully, suggestions and recommendations will attain ardent exploration.

**Keywords:** international/regional organisation, cooperation, SAARC, countries, effective

### **Introduction**

#### **Historical Background of SAARC**

Cooperation is the pre-requisite principle for creating regional cooperation or organization. The origin of building an organization at the international level is quite varied. In the working paper "Regional Organizations and Conflict Management: Comparing ASEAN and SAARC," Kripa Sridharan has identified three central tenets that lead to forming a regional organization. These include as;

- i) A strong desire for reconciliation and rebuilding after a destructive war.
- ii) Keeness to dampen ongoing intra-regional conflicts.
- iii) A necessity to circumvent the discomfiture of being a region lacking a regional entity.

She further argued that creating a regional organization under such circumstances might "*be difficult but not infeasible*", as European states and Southeast Asian non-communist states proved after the second Great War and the 1960s, respectively. As per the SAARC, it falls under a new dynamic of regionalism because it was not an organization formed by the outcome of any destructive war or on the lines of rebuilding and re-structuring intent <sup>[1]</sup>.

Edward R. McMahon and Scott H. Barker argued that the history of alliances and treaties is well-stocked with the instances of politics conquering discrete variances for mutual goals, as it has been traced dates back to the times of Egyptians. But now, this era has begun with the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 established that state sovereignty is supreme in the domestic and international foci of several states. During this period, the most significant number of alliances and cooperation intending to protect the states, governments, or polity and its borders, notwithstanding through these pacts expecting the same neutral or unbiased outcome from the other nation-states <sup>[2]</sup>. But the history of creating SAARC through an alliance and cooperation among the countries in the region is entirely different and dissimilar. Here, in this case, the protection of state or states, governments or borders

adequately does not reflect the abovementioned view. One chief reason for the assumption put forward by Edward R. McMahon and Scott H. Barker, declared unfit because they had taken their stance in the light of history when at a time the South Asian region did not think of such alliance or cooperation among its countries because of direct colonial rule in most part of the region. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the scenario of the region was shifting towards a colonial government with the taking control over the Mughal empire by Britishers. It was during the fifties India was granted independence by Great Britain. The idea to have a regional organization in the South Asia region was developed in the mid-1980s <sup>[3]</sup>. Although, it dealt with the fundamental principles of development and economic growth of the region.

However, the regional organization like SAARC is a development of the region that came in the last facet of the 1980s, but some facts and pieces of evidence available to support that the dream to form such an organization was proposed in 1947. The idea of a regional organization in South Asia was discussed around the 1950s at least in three conferences: the Asian relations conference held in New Delhi in 1947, the Baguio Conference of 1950 in the Philippines, and the Colombo Powers Conference 1954 <sup>[4]</sup>. The idea has taken almost thirty years to achieved its functional status. Since 1977, the army general turned politician Zia-Ur-Rehman, the then President of Bangladesh, seemed to be working on the concrete idea to establish a similar organization to ASEAN in the South Asia region. He visited India in December 1977 and met with the then Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai to discussed the issues related to regional cooperation. King Birendra of Nepal had also contributed to this spur when he called for regional cooperation among the countries in the South Asia region on sharing of river water during his inaugural speech to the Colombo Plan Consultative Committee, which met in 1977 in Kathmandu. The king's call was highly appreciated and welcomed by the President Zia-Ur-Rehman of Bangladesh on King Birendra's Bangladesh visit in December 1978. President Zia-Ur-Rehman had informally discussed his idea to form a regional organization with many leaders of the region. After prolonged discussions and meetings about creating a regional organization, the first summit meeting of the heads of the government of South Asian countries or states was scheduled at Dhaka from 7-8 December 1985. It leads to the formal establishment of a regional organization under the designation of the South Asian Association for regional cooperation <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Member states of SAARC

Originally, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) comprised seven founding member states, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. At the same time, Afghanistan assumed its rightful place and became the eighth member state during the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit, held in New Delhi on April 3-4, 2007 <sup>[6]</sup>. SAARC has nine observer members, including Australia, China, the European Union, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Mauritius, Myanmar, and the United States of America. It is one of those regional organizations of the world which has more observers than its members <sup>[7]</sup>.

### Relevance of SAARC in the region

SAARC was formed to provide a common platform among the peoples of the South Asia region to work together for a shared spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding. The enhancement of economic growth, improvement in the social progress, and upgrading cultural development of people of the region were the central principles while establishing SAARC as a regional group. At the regional level, the endeavor to improve bilateral relations among the countries of South Asia was one of its guiding principles. Cooperation with the developing countries outside the region was also within the sphere of its credentials. And the one chief aim of SAARC is to cooperate with the organizations of the International and regional level with similar aims and purposes <sup>[8]</sup>. Rajkumar Singh assimilated three assumptions led to form SAARC. First, the enhancement of economic goals through cooperative measures. Second, enhancing cooperation in industrial and commercial activity areas will decrease the ruthlessness of arguable disputes to a handling level. Finally, the expansion of communications and initiating negotiations from the platform of SAARC will effect an encouraging change in the attitudes and stances of leadership that might help bring consensus for the end of a conflict through peaceful means <sup>[9]</sup>. Thus, it is clear that SAARC was formed to provide a platform in the region to negotiate, cooperate and encourage economic development, cement ties among the region's countries and promote collective measures for the connectivity and expansion of peace over the conflict in the area.

The formation of SAARC was an effort to yield institutional mechanisms for regional integration to enhance regional identity and cooperative growth stratagem, enabling the best and most acceptable use of inter-regional trade and social and political development <sup>[10]</sup>. Since its establishment in 1985, SAARC has become an essential forum for addressing the region's wide range of prevailing issues. The member states meet annually, while foreign ministers are supposed to meet twice a year. Over the years, eighteen SAARC summits while thirty-seven sessions of the Council of Ministers have been held. Council has also been meeting informally along the sidelines of United Nations General Assembly Sessions since 1997. However, it was also a positive step in the furtherance of the regional organization <sup>[11]</sup>. The agenda of SAARC has been extended considerably over the years. It demonstrates that the ability and determination to work cooperatively and jointly on the issues pertaining to:

- i) Human resources development and tourism.
- ii) Agriculture and rural development.
- iii) Environment, natural disasters and biotechnology.
- iv) Economic, trade and finance.
- v) Social affairs.
- vi) Information and poverty alleviation.
- vii) Energy, transport, science and technology.
- viii) Education, security and culture.
- ix) Among others <sup>[12]</sup>.

SAARC was formally established on the desired objectives of cooperation amongst the member states to achieve consistent economic, cultural, social and political development in the region <sup>[13]</sup>.

In the field of economy, one of the desired objectives of SAARC was to enable optimal utilization of human and

material resources, strengthen pace for the economic development with the help of unrestricted trade and investment in the region <sup>[14]</sup>. Despite taking several initiatives, it has not yet been able to achieve the desired and critical objectives mutually established at the time of the South Asian regional association's inception. The key reason behind this could be the traditional rivalry between India and Pakistan that did not allow this regional organization to move towards the more incredible achievement <sup>[15]</sup>. For instance, the 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit was scheduled to be held in Islamabad, Pakistan, in November 2016, was canceled because of India and Pakistan rivalry. It also amounted to more significant concern in almost all member states of the SAARC. India's problem was that the terrorist attack of September 2016 in Uri was an act of cross border terrorist activity, which Pakistan retaliated by stating that *"the spirit of the SAARC Charter is violated when a member state casts the shadow of its bilateral problems on the multilateral forum for regional cooperation"* <sup>[16]</sup>. In the wake of the Uri attack, India decided not to participate in the SAARC summit, followed by the other member states of the organization. Eventually, the role of SAARC seemed very much ineffective in managing and control such ruthless episodes in the region. Maintaining peace in the area was also a fundamental principle of SAARC. Still, its inadequate efforts and lack of interest from member states ruined that very spirit on which SAARC was formalized.

#### **Ineffectiveness of SAARC in building peace in the context of South Asia**

SAARC has been facing various serious complications since its inception, which are obstructing it from achieving success. Dash observed that SAARC is nothing more than a talking shop that can only offer lip service to the various issues related to peace and development in the South Asia region <sup>[17]</sup>. SAARC is merely a public perception in terms of unity in South Asia. It is nowhere standing as an actual facilitator in nurturing peace and development and cooperation in the region. The public, intelligentsia, academicians, scholars, and other observers and analysts frequently criticizing the role of SAARC with the perspective as it is a forum by which countries of the region can only reach the agreements on the lowest level of cooperation instead pushing for cooperation by which actual gains could be made. Dr. M.H. Nuri, a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan, postulated that due to the absence of closeness among member countries, the SAARC is said to be a failed organization. He also revealed that the lack of awareness in understanding among member states is another obstacle in the ineffectiveness of SAARC in the region <sup>[18]</sup>.

Atiur Rehman has alleged that the South Asia region has suffered from *"deeply rooted mutual suspicions, nuclear proliferation, violent ethnic cleavages and a decline in regional social capital"* displayed in interstate and trans-state connection. The Indo-Pakistan enmity is also a factor contributing to dismantling the age-old South-Asian identity. In the modern age of the globalized world, instead of making close contacts with more outstanding and more significant economic and social integrations, the region has opted to isolate itself from each other. This has been happening despite having SAARC. While most other regional integration in the world is continuously emerging as close-knit communities, SAARC has yet to grow <sup>[19]</sup>.

Although the idea of SAARC is still relevant, some factors are held responsible for constraining the cooperation from the region. Elements included; Indo-centric tactical gradients among India's neighborhood and prominent actors around the global diplomacy, which has often created issues and problems for equal participation in the organization. India is a big nation under its size, population, economic wealth and is mainly perceived as a big brother in the region. On the other hand, the smaller countries are mostly feared by this Indian domination largely guided by politico-security magnitudes. Below are some points which are contributing to making the SAARC an ineffective regional organization.

- Trust deficit among the south Asian governments.
- Smaller nations mostly remained under the shadow of fear and anxiety by Indian domination.
- Trade imbalances, particularly within the region.
- All countries of the region sharing similar economic impasses such as low incomes, abundant labor, etc.
- The leadership of the region talked more about cooperation instead of making any serious commitment.
- Bilateral issues often build distress and anguish between the region's neighboring countries by which SAARC has to suffer, for instance, Indo-Pak rivalry, Afghan-Pak contemptible relations, India-Bangladesh hostile relations, etc.
- SAARC has been cooperating in non-controversial areas such as; social and cultural fields instead of extending the desire to cooperate in controversial areas.
- Often hopes amounted whenever all the region leaders came together, but unfortunately, all have remained to fulfill.
- SAARC has been lagging behind any new collective rejuvenation since its inception in 1985 <sup>[20]</sup>.

S.S. Rahman (2011) has observed four main factors contributing to showing SAARC's inability to gain peace and prosperity in the region. Firstly, common threat perception is viable to make SAARC ineffective and unproductive. Secondly, the role of the critical state, which is also a significant barrier, the key state represented their interest in the larger sense, which is not suitable for the growth of an institution like SAARC. Thirdly, the role of extra-regional powers also caused to slow down the process of building peace and prevented the region from developing. Finally, all three factors are creating a significant hurdle for SAARC <sup>[21]</sup>.

Mahendra Lama observed that the SAARC's inability is due to the *"issue of non-implementation and the dismal performance of action."* SAARC as an organization has achieved very little and showed not many good ambiances in terms of matching with its fundamental objectives and reaching a level of benefits for the people of the region. SAARC was formed to accelerate economic growth and development in the region, promote welfare, empower collective self-reliance, contribute to mutual trust and understandings and collaborate and cooperate at the economic, social, cultural, and technical end, but these all remained only in paperwork. The process of an effective implementation was much far away even in the current scenario, SAARC is a disabled and functionally retarded institution <sup>[22]</sup>. Some central issues need to be addressed effectively and jointly from the SAARC platform to eradicate its ineffectiveness in functioning. These are;

### 1. Terrorism

It's, been over three decades since the inception of SAARC. Terrorism had to be eradicated because it was one of the common issues for all SAARC member states. Instead of its eradication, terrorism had further distanced the SAARC countries, especially India and Pakistan. It shall be very unfortunate for the region if terrorism has not been taken seriously from SAARC's platform by the member countries. It further left a question mark over the SAARC and its functional approach that, is this not a failure of SAARC if the terrorism has not been taken as a matter of grave concern even after passing three decades.

### 2. Mutual mistrust

Mistrust among the member countries is a huge menace that did not allow SAARC to be flourish. SAARC fell short of its expectations due to mistrust between the Pakistan-India relationship and other factors. For instance, as former Indian Minister for External affairs Yashwant Sinha rightly stated that the dysfunctional status of SAARC *"is a result of not only short-sighted economic policies and the contentious India-Pakistan relationship, but also of the deep mistrust in two key bilateral relationships: India-Bangladesh, and India-Sri Lanka"* [23]. It can be observed by the statement of the former Indian foreign minister that the failure of SAARC is due to mistrust among all of its member states and their bilateral relationship, apart from ineffective and short-sighted economic and other developmental policies.

### 3. Indo-Pakistan bilateral animosity

SAARC has made to remove the hatred and bitterness among the member states by coordinating economic integration, which had to initiate a peace process among the member states. The objective behind its formulation was to emulate the success of other similar forums like the European Union and ASEAN [24]. The relations between India and Pakistan are characterized by mistrust and suspicion. Initially, both countries have joined this regional organization for their own interests. Pakistan's apprehension was that the smaller nation's participation, particularly those (nations) which do not share even geographical boundary, could provide India a strength that would be used against Pakistan to alienate it from the region.

Similarly, Pakistan expected that if such a situation arises somehow, the same forum could be used against India to out-weight India and its influence. On the other hand, India also did join the South Asian organization in apprehensions and trepidations. The major was that the SAARC could be a forum that would be used for criticizing and bashing India or ganging up by the neighbors to oppose India. These factors convinced both India and Pakistan to attain membership of SAARC [25]. India and Pakistan became members of the regional grouping (SAARC) to advance economic cooperation in the region. But due to the trust deficit and annoying relationship between both countries, the process of SAARC became ineffective on numerous occasions. The 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was canceled, which led to suffering SAARC due to the Indo-Pak rival state of the relationship [26].

### 4. Politically different governing systems in the region

The different political systems in the region are also factors that constrain the SAARC for achieving the millennium success goals. However, there is democracy in the region,

but all member states follow their political interactions and values. Like India, democracy is also there in Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, but all have different democratic values. This also makes SAARC ineffective regional grouping.

### 5. SAARC Charter

The Charter of SAARC has been prepared in a way that was being kept purely apolitical. It does not allow any country to discuss bilaterally or any contentious issue under the banner of SAARC. This shows that the organization is based on cooperation, but on the other hand, it deflects that no member states can figure out the contentious issues by using the SAARC platform to reach a point where states can cooperate instead of expanding the business of hatred. SAARC Charter is to be in a way that can sack all the bilateral and inter-state issues of the region. This can reduce the level of the ineffectiveness of SAARC.

### 6. SAARC's inability to tackle the inter-state conflict

The inability to tackle the inter-state dispute is a factor that constraints the SAARC from doing effective business in the region. Moreover, SAARC was based on the principle that all decisions have to be taken unanimously, and no issues, mainly bilateral and contentious, can be on the agenda of SAARC. This strongly indicates how an organization is possible when there shall be a fragile and delicate inter-state relationship among member states towards equitable participation in framing policy for the people of that particular region [27].

### 7. India's Domination in the SAARC

The SAARC is also ineffective because of India's role. India is being perceived as a big brother in the region; every smaller nation and a smaller member state of the regional grouping has remained under the Indian shadow of fair. India's wish and desire to remain in the decision-making process of the SAARC as a big brother or leader of the region has created concerns among the neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh [28].

### 8. Trade imbalances in the region

Most South Asian countries have opted for trade liberalization in the 1990s. The intra-regional trade imbalance is due to the lack of trade facilitation, unavailability of physical infrastructure, and hampering connectivity among the trading partners. Moreover, port efficiency, customs environment, and infrastructure related to the service sectors are also the bottlenecks of intra-regional trade imbalances. Besides the above mentioned, some political issues hugely contribute to the imbalance of intra-regional trade, such as; connectivity, transit facilities for the movement of goods, intra-regional trade procedures regarding imports and exports, etc. [29] Lack of trust among the member states has also manifested the ineffective administration of several initiatives taken by the SAARC. In this regard, SAFTA is a prime example [30].

### 9. Need to scuffle alternative approach

The ineffectiveness of SAARC has developed an alternative approach. For instance, in recent years, most of the South Asian countries giving more attention to developing linkages with other regional groupings. India has started

looking towards ASEAN more emphatically and enthusiastically despite being a founding member state of SAARC. Pakistan has also tried to shift its interest towards West Asia despite being a SAARC member. Bangladesh has also made some attempts to play its Islamic identity and move towards Southeast Asia. Nepal has also maintained close ties with China to exterminate the influence of India.

Moreover, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan joined the BIMSTEC<sup>1</sup> of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and SASEC<sup>2</sup> (South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation). Most South Asian countries have adopted this alternative approach. It indicates that these SAARC member states are fascinating in other regional groupings instead of being member states of SAARC. Pakistan is in some way alienated from the SAARC by these member countries by adopting an alternative approach. It adequately leads to provide an ineffective administration that hinders the smooth process of SAARC<sup>[31]</sup>.

However, SAARC had a good opening for regional economic integration, but member states could not maintain the aspirations they manifested at the beginning of this regional grouping. Consequently, SAARC has only become an organization of lukewarm rather than making declarations on the objectives<sup>[32]</sup>. In addition, there is also a need to focus on the areas like people-to-people contacts, need to take stern steps towards improvement of pathetic conditions of South Asia, more focus on robust infrastructure, emphasis on building trust and cooperation among member states for the smooth activation of SAARC.

### Recommendations

Following are the recommendations I suggest for the making of SAARC an effective organization:

- There are few fundamental weaknesses by which the operationalization of SAARC is suffering. Those weaknesses include trust deficit among the member states, which needs to be addressed at the earliest phase to achieve smooth functioning in the region.
- The other one is political differences among member states; this needs to end as soon as possible for the sake of economic integration and collaboration.
- SAARC countries should have to collaborate to address the common problems of the region.
- Rivalry among member states often leads to misguiding the organization and contributing to creating more rifts and barriers among member states. All countries should jointly focus on common issues like terrorism, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, etc.
- The SAARC charter must be amended to provide a platform for negotiating common global issues facing

member countries like security, peace and tranquility, trade and commerce, etc.

- Beneficial cooperation among member countries, particularly in the economic area, may create a harmonious environment that will help decide whether the political differences can be discussed or set aside by each member country from the SAARC.
- SAARC should try to enlarge investment-related activities between its member countries. The priority must be given to promote South Asian Joint venture advancement schemes.
- South Asia is a region that holds great potential for rapid improvement in the energy sector. This energy sector needs to be linked together through an integrated electric power grid system in South Asia. By doing so, South Asian countries could boost technical and financial resources through joint and common projects.
- Collaboration in the field of Arts, Education, Sciences, and Technologies could bring a harmonious environment. The exchange of faculties and students among the universities in SAARC countries could also help make an effective organization.

### Conclusion

The formation of SAARC was a revolutionary step that the leaders of South Asia took. It was established to enhance the strive regarding the economic integration, promotion of mutual trust, to promote peace and economic well-being among the member states. Therefore, the emergence of SAARC was an outstanding idea, but its process pushed it close towards the zone of ineffectiveness due to institutional and structural failure. The SAARC is still relevant, but the problem lies only in its functional approach. So, the ineffectiveness of the working of SAARC should have to be tackled as soon as possible because this is an organization that can establish a South Asian community. No doubt, SAARC has achieved successes in various subjects and fields, but the political differences among the member states have slowed down its progress.

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1 On June 6, 1997, BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand economic cooperation) a new sub-regional grouping was formed in Bangkok. On December 22, 1997 by the joining of Myanmar it was renamed as BIMEST-EC. In February 2004, Nepal and Bhutan became its full-fledge members. On 31 July, 2004 the first summit was held under the banner of BIMESTIC. See more [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bay\\_of\\_Bengal\\_Initiative\\_for\\_Multi-Sectoral\\_Technical\\_and\\_Economic\\_Cooperation#Background](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bay_of_Bengal_Initiative_for_Multi-Sectoral_Technical_and_Economic_Cooperation#Background)

2 SASEC (South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation), a program was set up in 2001 that brings Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka together. Its headquarters is situated in Manila, Philippines. See more [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Asia\\_Subregional\\_Economic\\_Cooperation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia_Subregional_Economic_Cooperation)

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