

Relevance of SAARC in The 21st Century

Dimple Thakur

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Govt. Degree College, Kumarsain (Shimla)

Email: dimple23190@gmail.com

Abstract

Regional organizations are quickly emerging as a significant and effective new venue for global political and economic relations. The primary goal of such regional organizations has been to address the fundamental issue of inter-state completeness in an anarchic international system marked by self-help and security dilemmas. When the regional countries established SAARC nearly thirty-five years ago, they were well aware of the significance of such an organization. They recognize its importance even today. This paper analyzes the relevance of SAARC, and its challenges faced by South Asian nations. It also highlights the achievements and failures of SAARC. SAARC has politically significant because it gives an alternate structure of interaction to existing bilateral channels, not just for India but also for other member countries in developing constructive relationships with one another.

Keywords

SAARC nations, Challenges, Achievements, Failure.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 17.07.2022

Approved: 16.09.2022

Dimple Thakur

*Relevance of SAARC in
The 21st Century*

*RJPP Apr.22-Sept.22,
Vol. XX, No. II,*

*pp.212-220
Article No. 28*

Online available at :

[https://anubooks.com/
rjpp-2022-vol-xx-no-2](https://anubooks.com/rjpp-2022-vol-xx-no-2)

Introduction

The European Union's success as a regional organization has been attempted to be emulated by other regions, with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) being one such example, founded in 1985. SAARC is the shared dream/vision of regional cooperation among Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which make up the South Asian Subcontinent. (Banerjee: 2014). SAARC provided a platform for the peoples of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding based on mutual respect, equity and shared benefits. The combined economy of SAARC is 3rd largest in the world in the terms of GDP (PPP) after the United States and China and 8th largest in the terms of nominal GDP. SAARC nations comprise 3% of the world's area and in contrast, have 21% (around 1.7 billion) of the world's total population. (Giri, Karinje, & Verma, 2015). The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an economic and geopolitical organization made up of eight countries primarily located in South Asia or the Indian subcontinent. Among these eight countries, India accounts for more than 70% of the region's population. Between 2005 and 2010, SAARC's average GDP growth rate was 8.8% each year, but it fell to 6.5 percent in 2011 due to a financial slowdown in India, which, along with low oil prices, saw South Asia become the world's fastest-growing region in the fourth quarter of 2014. SAARC countries' overseas trade inventories have remained at USD 411 billion since 2015. (Srivastava, 2015)

South Asia is ethnically diverse, with more than 2,000 ethnic entities with populations ranging from hundreds of millions to small tribal groups. South Asia has been invaded and settled by many ethnic groups over the centuries-including various Dravidians, and Indo-Aryan groups and the amalgamation of Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and native societies have produced composite cultures with many common traditions and belief. (Shiekh & Mir, 2016)

The importance of SAARC is, and has always been, undeniable. When the regional countries established it nearly thirty-five years ago, they were well aware of the significance of such an organization. They recognize its importance even today, as evidenced by their attendance at meetings and pledges to make it a successful and productive organization. (Khan, 2015)

The Vision and Reality of the SAARC Report Card

Even while SAARC lacks the vitality it requires, the thirty-five-year-old organization has a number of accomplishments to its credit that keep it relevant in today's world. It is politically significant because it gives an alternate structure of

interaction to existing bilateral channels, not just for India but also for other member countries in developing constructive relationships with one another (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2014)

South Asian countries' manufacturing patterns are also "competition rather than complementary." They compete with 'each other for market share,' and prefer to import from industrialized countries rather than their neighbors 'because of quality and credit availability.' 'There is an inefficient and uncompetitive industrial structure, high obstacles to investment, large-scale informal-illegal border commerce... and weak cross-border trading infrastructures' in most South Asian nations, with the exception of maybe India and Sri Lanka. However, there are signs of improvement in some of the issue areas, albeit slowly. Apart from economic difficulties, SAARC's scorecard on numerous social and security issues is woefully inadequate. (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2014)

Challenges

SAARC was formed with great zeal and high expectations. It declared that improving people's welfare and quality of life was its top priority. An objective assessment of the existing regional socio-economic conditions indicates that SAARC could not achieve most, if any, of its objectives. Its performance has been unsatisfactory in several respects. SAARC has not been successful in achieving many of its targets such as universal literacy, vaccination, poverty alleviation, and eradication of child labor, malnutrition, and the gender discrimination, etc. (Naazar & Hussan, Spring 2016)

South Asia is a land of densely populated, mostly illiterate people who live in extreme poverty, face the worst health conditions, and are subjected to inhumane government behavior. Second, South Asia has been subjected to constant security threats, resulting from both internal conflicts among regional powers and external states seeking to assert hegemony over the region. Finally, the SAARC region focuses primarily on socioeconomic development. (Khan, 2015)

The reasons for this bleak situation are not difficult to find. In general, there are many of hurdles to SAARC's development. Political impediments include perceptions of India as a big brother by her small neighbors. (Bajpai, 2014). Another important challenge in SAARC's success is the rivalry between India and Pakistan, the two major players in South Asia. The disputes between India and Pakistan on the issues like Jammu and Kashmir, Siachin, Sir Creeks, disputes between India and Sri Lanka over the nationality of Tamilians, disputes between India and Nepal on the questions of open borders and disputes between India and Bangladesh over

migration from Chittagong Hill Tract, demarcation of boundary and sharing of the water of the Gang river, all these bilateral disputes hinder the way of effective regional co-operation in the South Asia as almost all the domestic and foreign policies of the member states, particularly of India and Pakistan are being evolved on the basis of these stubborn issues. Although, at the time of SAARC formation, it was unanimously agreed that bilateral issues will not be raised in the SAARC summits but these issues always emerged in a very dominant manner and affected the working of SAARC. Inter-state disputes are also wreaking havoc on the SAARC, with member states blaming one another for assisting and abetting separatist and secessionist forces. India has problems in Jammu and Kashmir and the North Eastern States, Pakistan has problems in Sindh and the NWFP, Sri Lanka has a severe Tamil-Sinhala racial conflict, and Nepal has a Maoist movement, and Bhutan and the Maldives have internal political issues. As a result, all of these challenges paint a bleak picture of the South Asian region. Instead of working together to address such issues, member nations blame one another, fueling religious extremism, sectarianism, and secessionism, ethnic and political bloodshed throughout the region. (Ahmad, 2014).

Economic impediments include differential development levels and glaring economic inequalities in the region in areas such as trade, manufacturing, and services, as well as low intra-regional trade among the tiger nations. (Bajpai, 2014).

India and Pakistan must identify issues of mutual concern and work together to address them in order to achieve the SAARC goals. Given their long history of mistrust and distrust, it will be extremely difficult for the two countries to forsake their past hostile policies against each other. (Pramanik, 2014)

SAARC countries are confronted with both internal and external challenges. In recent years, terrorism has presented a significant danger to mutual understanding and collaboration in the region. Some of India's neighbors are suspected of providing it with governmental support, which must be prevented if SAARC is to flourish. (Pramanik, 2014). The 19th Summit was scheduled to take place in Islamabad in 2016, but it has yet to take place due to Pakistan's continued support for and direct investment in cross-border terrorist attacks against Indian targets. Talks and terrorism, according to India, are incompatible. (Haran, 2018)

Nature has endowed the entire region with abundant resources. SAARC is home to some of the world's highest mountain peaks, as well as some of the world's largest rivers and forests. It is also a haven for diversity. Lack of infrastructure, such as rail and road routes, water, and transportation communication facilities, as well as illiteracy in some areas, technological dependence on the west, low intra-regional trade and a small share of global trade, and neglect of agriculture and rural areas

and small industries, have all contributed to the problems. There will be no energy, water, or food shortages in the region if resources are gathered diligently and cooperatively by the region's member states (Pramanik, 2014)

SAARC's Achievements

If we look at SAARC's progress over the course of the study, it's very small and slow, leading many informed observers to doubt the organization's effectiveness as a forum for addressing common problems among its members. (Haran, 2018). SAARC focuses on combating social evils such as poverty, health and education, products and people smuggling, notably of women and children, while avoiding divisive subjects. However, it is regrettable that SAARC has failed to meet expectations in these areas as well. SAARC has taken numerous resolutions at its successive summits since its creation; however, their execution has been poor. Despite this, some key conventions and agreements are given below which show that SAARC has relevance even today. (Hafeez, Autumn 2016)

- **Food Security Reserve:** During the third SAARC Summit in 1987, an agreement was reached to establish the SAARC Food Security Reserve, which went into effect on August 12, 1988. It was intended to serve as a food reserve in the event of a disaster.
- **The SAARC Regional Convention on Terrorism Prevention.** It was signed in Kathmandu during the third SAARC Summit in November 1987 and entered into force on August 22, 1988. According to this treaty, member governments are obligated to extradite or punish alleged terrorists, effectively depriving them of their safe haven.
- **SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances:** convention was signed in November 1990 at the fifth SAARC Summit and went into effect on September 15, 1993. It aims to reinforce and augment all relevant international treaties at the regional level, as well as foster regional cooperation among member states in law enforcement and demand reduction.
- In 1992, the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme was established. Recognizing the importance of having people-to-people contacts among the peoples of SAARC countries.
- **SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA):** On April 11, 1993, during the seventh SAARC Summit, the Ministers of member states signed this agreement. It was created with the goal of gradually liberalizing intra-regional trade.

- SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia: As the title of the Convention indicates, it was signed in recognition of the fact that South Asia is home to a quarter of the world's children, many of whom require assistance and protection in order to fully enjoy their rights, develop to their full potential, and lead a responsible life in family and society. On January 5, 2002, this Convention was signed.
- SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution: This Convention was signed on January 5, 2002, in recognition of the fact that trafficking in women and children for prostitution is incompatible with human dignity and honor and is a violation of basic human rights.
- The South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) was primarily envisioned as the first step toward the transition to a Customs Union, Common Market, and Economic Union by lowering import tariffs on eligible items and ensuring special and most favorable treatment for the region's least developed countries. The SAFTA Agreement was signed on January 6, 2004, in Islamabad, Pakistan, at the Twelfth SAARC Summit. The Agreement became effective on January 1, 2006, and the Trade Liberalization Program began on July 1, 2006. SAARC members were required to reduce their duties to 20% by 2009 under this agreement.
- The establishment of the SAARC University in New Delhi, which began its inaugural academic session in 2010, is another notable achievement of the SAARC in recent years. The notion of establishing a SAARC University, which would give world-class facilities and professional teachers to students and researchers from SAARC member nations, was proposed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the Thirteenth SAARC Summit in Dhaka in November 2005. At the 14th SAARC Summit, the 'Inter-governmental Agreement for the Establishment of the South Asian University was signed. (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2014)
- SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters: The SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters was signed on August 3, 2008, with the goal of combating crime by enhancing collaboration in crime prevention, investigation, and prosecution.
- At the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, the SAARC Framework Agreement on Energy Cooperation (Electricity) was signed. This agreement allows for voluntary cross-border commerce of electricity, according to the

individual members' laws, rules, and regulations. It allows Member states to negotiate the terms, conditions, payment security method, and duration of electricity trade, among other things. India approved the agreements on July 30, 2015. The SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters was signed in November 2011 at the 17th SAARC Summit, with the goal of institutionalizing regional disaster response cooperation among SAARC countries. For the SAARC member states, India has also hosted a number of disaster management workshops, seminars, and training programs. During the years of 2015 terrible earthquakes in Nepal, India responded quickly with aid and knowledge.

- The South Asian Agreement on Services (SATIS), which entered into force in December 2012 but has yet to be fully implemented, with leaders calling for SATIS to be operationalized as soon as possible during their Kathmandu Summit in 2014.
- Both the SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement and the SAARC Railways Agreement were completed in time for signing in Kathmandu. This may have been a great achievement, but Pakistan's misgivings at the last minute prevented the Agreements from being signed. Pakistan has stated that they have not been able to complete their internal procedure (officially).

Failures

SAARC has a population of 1.6 billion people, accounting for one-fifth of the world's population. Almost half of the population of the SAARC lives in poverty, making it one of the poorest regions in the world. Many people are illiterate, lack access to decent health care, and suffer from a variety of difficulties. SAARC was envisioned as a regional organization that might ease these social, economic, and political difficulties and set individual governments on the route to progress. (Ahmad, 2014). Furthermore, Prime Minister Jigme Thinly stated bluntly during the 16th SAARC summit in Bhutan that "Some 200 meetings take place every year among SAARC countries, but these meetings are not matched by results." Over the previous 35 years, SAARC has accomplished little and remained a marginal organization. During a time when the world is moving toward multilateral and regional development approaches, SAARC has yet to develop an integrated development strategy to propel the region's economic progress. Lack of connectivity and non-tariff trade barriers, as well as bilateral geopolitical disagreements among members, are important reasons for SAARC's dysfunction. SAARC, according to academics, has certain fundamental structural flaws. In the words of Biswa Pradhan former Foreign Secretary of Nepal "Many of the decisions are just in papers in the form of

protocols, conventions, reports and studies". The SAARC Summit has always ended in disappointment. (Sahoo, 2018). Bilateral conflicts have hampered SAARC's progress without a doubt, and such divisions are not limited to the conflict between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, throughout its 35 years of existence, SAARC has only held 18 annual summits, owing to bilateral differences, such as those between India and Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh, and Nepal and Bhutan. There have been no noteworthy achievements in its 35 years of existence; however minor progress has been made in a few sectors. Smaller countries' fear of India, mistrust among member nations' unhappy India-Pakistan relations, member states' self-centered mentality, and a lack of Western support are the biggest roadblocks to SAARC advancement. The SAARC countries' regional cooperation is based on a realization of the multiple issues that the area faces, which cannot be solved by any single state. To address these, all countries must work together to build a common vision of regional cooperation in several areas. (Ahmad, 2014)

A successful regional bloc should primarily function as a trading bloc. SAARC was unable to take even the most basic steps toward promoting mutual commerce. One of the main reasons for their failure is the small size of local markets, the lack of a strong industrial base, and the traditional focus on producing consumer goods, as well as poor infrastructure and socioeconomic issues. The SAARC was formed with high hopes and intentions of achieving long-term peace in the region and resolving the problems of the people who live there. It couldn't even play a significant role in facilitating and improving the member countries' lifestyles. (Khan, 2015)

Conclusion

Unfortunately, even summits are frequently portrayed as little more than a photo op for South Asian leaders; a talk shop where statements and commitments are issued but rarely implemented. The Modi government's foreign policy demonstrates a strong interest in India's immediate neighborhood, which is good news for SAARC. True, this organization will only reach its full potential if India takes the lead. If the SAARC wants to be functional, Pakistan and India, in particular, must work to settle their disputes. Smaller countries must accommodate India's regional and global ambitions, and they must see India as an opportunity for economic growth and human resource development, particularly in the field of information technology. If SAARC is strengthened, it will be able to play a significant role in the region. It cannot be dismissed in the future. All member states must avoid a bilateral strategy in favor of regional cooperation.

References

1. Ahmad, D.S. (2014). SAARC at 30:Assessing Regional Co-operation in South Asia. *World Focus. XXXV. No.11*. Pg. **48-54**.
2. Bajpai, D. (2014). India's Bottom-UP Approach of Regional Integration at SAARC. *World Focus. XXXV. No.11*. Pg. **65-70**.
3. Banerjee, A., Banerjee, I. (2014). SAARC in the 21st Century World Order: Redundant or Still Relevant? *World Focus. XXXV. No.11*. Pg. **135-148**.
4. Giri, P., Karinje, P., Verma, R. (2015). A Study And Analysis of Challenges, Achievements And Hurdles Faced By SAARC Nations in Trade Integration And Growth. *International Journal of Engineering Technology, Management and Applied Sciences. 3(1)*. Pg. **204-215**.
5. Hafeez, M. (Autumn 2016). 2016 SAARC Summit: Future of Regional Cooperation in South Asia. *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. Vol. 36. No.3*. Pg. **38-57**.
6. Haran, V. (2018). Regional Cooperation in South Asia. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal. 198*.
7. Khan, A.R. (2015). Impediments to the Success of SAARC. *South Asian Studies. 30. No.1*. Pg. **291-301**.
8. Naazar, M.A., Hussan, S. (Spring 2016). SAARC After Three Decade: An Assessment of Progress in Regional Cooperation in Functional Areas (1985-2015). *Global Social Science Review (GSSR). I. No.1*. Pg. **18-38**.
9. Pramanik, B. (2014). SAARC Possibilities, Overcast by Problems. *World Focus. XXXV. No.11*. Pg. **15-20**.
10. Sahoo, D.P. (2018). India's Search for new Regional Equation: SAARC or Alternative? *World Focus. Volume XXXIX. Number 3*. Pg. **110-117**.
11. Shiekh, N.A., Mir, M. A. (2016). The framing of SAARC development goals: South Asia's response to millennium development goals. *International Journal of Applied Research*. Pg. **570-575**.
12. Srivastava, M. (2015). An evaluation of SAARC in the regional development of South Asia. *SCHOLEDGE International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Allied Studies. 02(09)*. Pg. **6-9**.