



A view on SAARC: Complexities, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract:

SAARC is a Regional Cooperation that aims to bring regional integration among its members despite the political differences and the administrative hurdles. The region is strategically important that connects with other Regional Integrations like Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). History has proved this region as sub-continent with common entity with many specific issues among the countries in the region. Historically the region has brought laurels known for great rivers and great ancient civilization. The region was a common entity under one umbrella rule under the British. Post 1947 created space of possibility for foreign interference in which India did not favour. Recent developments have created trust deficit among member countries. Uneven economic growth is one such issue to obstruct regional integration. Politically, the region has different ideologies from democracy to military to monarchy. Some countries in the region go to extent downgrading democratic values and democratic rules. Further, Disintegration of USSR and aftermath of Post cold war have shifted the world order to liberalize giving space for new regional powers which initiated formation of regional integration leading to more economic prosperity and development of infrastructure. SAARC is about 40 years old since its establishment in 1985 however not quite successful. Formation of SAFTA was a remarkable step to strengthen regional grouping among member countries. The article considers the historical facts of regional formation and impact of security concerns and necessity of considering the ground reality for a successful future. The paper examines the complexities, failures, future prospects and recommends suggestions.

Key words: Regional Integration, SAFTA, SAARC, Political Differences, Security Concerns, ASEAN.

Introduction

Historical Background

SAARC being the first properly organized regional set –up formed by members of the region in December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The original members are Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Presently there are eight members in addition with Afghanistan in 2007. The former president Zir-ur-Rahman of Bangladesh initiated the very idea of SAARC (Sachin N. Pardhe, 2024). At the very beginning, two largest countries so called India and Pakistan were suspicious of Bangladesh proposal of forming a regional platform. The very idea of forming the regional integration was motivated by a shared vision of encouraging regional cooperation, economic growth and cultural exchange among members of SAARC (Tarannum & Dr. Shujauddin Khan, 2023). Performance of the Regional Organization is comparatively low to that of other regional integration e.g. Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The region is home to 23.4 % of the World Population yet accommodates only 6.66 % of the World's gross domestic product (GDP) using purchasing power parity (Sengupta Jayashree, 2023). Intra-regional trade is one such area in which performance is low. Estimation has shown highlighting that intra regional trade as a share of South Asia's total foreign trade was only 5 % in 2014, against 25.8% for ASEAN member countries (Jayashree, 2023). Political scenario in cold war and after cold war with the rise of neo-liberal dominance has brought changes in the whole environment. Some countries like Pakistan are more prone to the influence of other powerful countries like the USA and China. Pakistan is one which is member of Military Alliance i.e. SEATO. Member countries must stay far away from making the region the rivalry ground field of the powerful countries. Democratic values are more or less deteriorating in most countries of this region. Liberty and freedom i.e. freedom of speech and expression are centre points of democratic values. Unfortunately there are frequent complaints of malpractices of transparency and accountability from various sections in election which is a mandatory in democracy.

SAARC and India as a 'big brother'

India has been playing as regional power initiating cooperation in areas like reduction of north-south gap, emancipation of women, tackling of drug trafficking etc. Further India as Peace lover has contributed in maintaining peaceful environment citing example like India's peace keeping mission in Sri Lanka during Prime Minister Ship of Rajiv Gandhi. SAARC leaders agreed to the establishment of a South Asian University at New Delhi, India. Some common areas are rural development, telecommunication, transport,



science and technology, drug trafficking, terrorism etc. It is recommended that all members must emphasize on economic growth and social development. SAARC might not previously consider as a complete solution to all remedies but it works as a political arena where diplomatic and issues are discussed. India is at present the fifth largest economy in the World. India's economic performance has far reaching repercussions. India economic power not only benefits and gives a place of a vast market to its neighbours but also provides development assistance aids, capacity building and infrastructure works (Jatin & Rishi, 2023)

Aftermath the end of cold war, Neo-liberalism as a dominant ideology with globalization, privatization, liberalization has shifted to another Post-1990s World Order. Disintegration of USSR has transformed the Bi-polar World towards Multi Polar World although the USA claims to be a Uni-Polar World. India presently the fifth largest Economy and the fourth strongest army has a unique role to play so as to fulfill the dreams of the organization. To initiate and play a greater role in the regional integration and development, India has started "Neighbourhood First" policy which is an idea from the Gujral doctrine. This policy has been a holistic approach to connect to our neighbours.

The Present status and Road Map Ahead

In Contemporary times, the region has an unpleasant atmosphere coupled in a complex situation politically and economically. Relation between India and Maldives has strained relations recently, with new pro china government coming to power in Maldives. Maldives Government demanded Indian Government to withdraw the Indian soldiers from their soil and later after round of talks, finally replaced Indian Military personnel (The Economic Times, 2024). Further Bangladesh also has faced political instability and economic issues like Poverty, unemployment etc. India presently faces a major challenge with New government under the leadership of Yunus in Bangladesh (Analiza Pathak, 2025). Further China plans to include Bangladesh into the fold of Belt and Road Initiative (Sreeradha, 2021). Other factors which strain the relations between India and Bangladesh are fencing to check illegal migrants (Analiza Pathak 2025).

The Region is strategically very important which links with other Regional Integration like ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific regional Organization like (Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), QUAD which is an informal strategic forum consisting four countries i.e. United States of America, India, Japan and Australia.

Geo -politically, Indian Ocean is should also be a peace zone and protected from any power and political rivalry between world powers. Subsequently, strategic importance of territorial location of the region should be considered to keep the Indian Ocean a "peace Zone".

According to The charter the decisions taken are unanimous and that no bilateral issue must be put forth (Article X [2]). The regional forum has been a political platform in which many common areas of interest are discussed through regular meetings.

Further, Social charter clearly focuses on the areas like health related issues, human resource development, women empowerment, protection of child rights, poverty eradication etc. According to the charter all members shall facilitate with legislative, executive, administrative support to improve socio-economic growth in the region.

The study analyzes SAARC's role in four major areas: promotion of economic cooperation, improvement of connectivity and infrastructure, organizing social and cultural exchanges and the quest of peace and security (Tarannum & Dr. Shujaiddin Khan, 2023).

Complexities and Challenges

The very reason for failure of successful regional integration in south Asia is the security concerns due to geopolitical settings considering the socio-political and historical facts.

Another important factor is the bilateral issues which have not been solved till today has remained always an obstacle in the smooth function of SAARC. Some of the bilateral issues like India- Pakistan issue have been there since independence. Since its inception in 1985, Member countries instead of cooperating among themselves at the regional level, most of them prefer to look towards the north for technology, infrastructure development and all other resources. The lack of cooperation has been one of reasons for lacking economic integration in the region.

Smaller member countries look up India with suspicious that India is following an imperialist policy. But in reality, India initiates to bring regional integration mainly economic cooperation in order to develop a conducive environment so that most political and disputes are settled and solved.

Uneven development and low economic growth, poverty, climate related issues, deforestation, security concerns of interference of extra-regional actors and powerful countries like the USA, China etc. Growing influence of China in the region is one of the strategic challenges that India needs to look at. China has inroads in neighbouring countries and develop massive infrastructure that needs to be cautiously looked at.

The very root cause of underperformance of the regional cooperation lies in the perspectives of security dynamics. There is the domination of traditional security and overemphasis on realpolitik considerations



(Sachin Pandhe, 2024, p. 13). Shifting of global power dynamics and rise of Asian countries in the global politics has reallocated the very idea of power concentration and global economy (Ibid).

Prospects

Coordination with other least Countries in the region: India as a big brother must initiate trading facilities, educational activities, provide economic aids etc. 12th Summit SAARC held in 2004 was a remarkable one in which South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was formed. It shall facilitate a common market, free flow of goods and services etc. SAFTA came into force in 2006. India, being the larger economy and the larger country in size and population must initiate the works of building coordination and investment activities.

SAARC can be act as a platform to initiate and promote unity among member countries. Availability of abundant flora and fauna, potentiality of tourism, rich cultural heritage can minimize the trust deficit and bring a change in the environment of development in the region and take part and compete in greater pace in economic development with other advanced countries. Improvement in connectivity among member countries and advantage of knowledge Hub in areas of educated youths and potentiality of Information and Technology, digital world can promote economy.

Conclusion

SAARC can be a centre stage to discuss all possibilities for regional integration, collaboration among member countries. It can act as platform to mediate all disputes, address common issues and challenges faced in various areas. The future prospects depends on its capacity to improve trust among member countries, cultural exchange, improve infrastructural connectivity, increase social connectivity, and people to people exchange programmes.

Further, SAARC can play an important arena of economic growth and business activities by reducing all trade barriers and controlling illegal business. It is the concern of each member countries to make this a conducive environment for economic activities so as to attract investments from other countries and improve intra-regional trade. Member countries should co-operate to tackle issues like international terrorism, illegal drug activities, human trafficking, illegal arms business etc.

Poor performance of SAARC led to look for formation of other smaller regional groupings like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal). We should encourage any developmental based grouping so that understanding and coordination among countries are improved as to increase overall improvement in the region.

Likewise, SAARC as a larger regional grouping must be encouraged and coordinated among member countries keeping aside all bilateral issues so that SAARC becomes a platform of remarkable economic growth and peaceful settlement of all other disputed issues. In order to acquire a harmonious environment and peaceful environment in the region, 'soft' power is better option over the 'Hard power'. It is soft power which can deal that involves a multilateral cooperation (Nye, 2005).

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