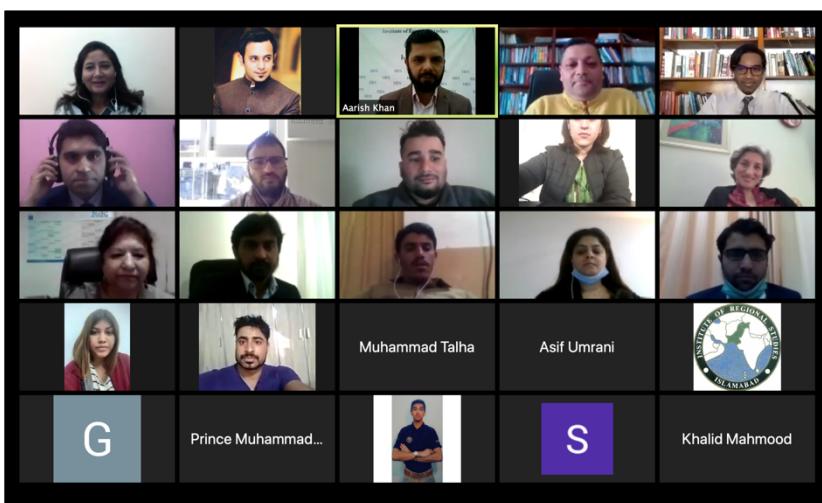


Institute of Regional Studies

Reviving SAARC is the only option



ISLAMABAD December 2, 2020: "Reviving SAARC is the only option because it is the lone regional cooperation organization that has all 8 South Asian countries as its members and we have already invested too much in the organization to let it go dormant," said Dr Nischal Pandey, the Director of the Kathmandu-based Centre for South Asian Studies. He was speaking at a webinar titled "35

years of SAARC: the way forward" organized by the Institute of Regional Studies here on Tuesday.

Dr. Pandey further stated that SAARC needed to be viewed as more than an inter-governmental organization and urged NGOs, women network, and academics to engage more frequently in people-to-people contacts with SAARC member countries. Mr. Abeya-Goonasekara, an academic and expert on geopolitics and foreign policy from Sri Lanka was of the view that geographical, political, and economic asymmetries among SAARC countries were important contributors to inhibiting its progress as an organization. He further called for overcoming the trust deficit and blame-game among SAARC member countries so that the organization could play its role in resolving the human security issues such as poverty, health, climate, and natural disasters.

Leading economist from Bangladesh Dr. Foyasal Khan presented the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a replicable model for South Asia in terms of economic integration. He shared an optimistic World Bank study on the economies of South Asian countries and stated that the glass of economic cooperation in South Asia was half full. He added that only need was to prioritize human security over state security in the decision-making paradigms of South Asian countries.

An academic from Bhutan Dr. Rabilal Dhakal called for modifying the SAARC Charter to enable it to discuss all issues confronted by the South Asian countries including the contentious ones. He also criticized the unanimity clause in the SAARC charter for decision-making. In response, Dr. Pandey remarked that unanimity was required to do away with the unanimity clause or any other reform of the SAARC Charter. He further stated that whenever there was political will, SAARC member countries have even bent SAARC rules to make changes happen. He specifically cited the example of the inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC for which, he maintained, there was no provision in SAARC Charter as it was silent on inclusion of new members into the organization.

Dr. Nausheen Wasi, Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, was of the view that removing impediments to cooperation among SAARC countries was an over-researched subject. She called for more regular meetings of SAARC member countries at all levels. She also urged the academia in the member countries of SAARC to avoid self-censorship and come up with ideas for promoting cooperation among SAARC member countries notwithstanding their respective governments' existing policy approaches towards regional cooperation in general and SAARC in particular. She also urged all SAARC countries to do some soul searching on lack of trade and people-to-people contact among SAARC countries and share responsibility for overcoming lack of cooperation rather than getting into a blame game. The President of IRS Amb Nadeem Riyaz thanked all the panellists for their candid remarks and open discussion.