

Prospects of Revival of SAARC - Role of Pakistan

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Introduction

The revival of SAARC remains a daunting challenge in the contemporary times. Since 2014, when the last summit was held in Kathmandu, SAARC has not been able to make its way to the next summit which was supposed to be held in Islamabad. It is since then that the organisation has been hostage to India-Pakistan conflictual relationships. The issue of terrorism, the revocation of Article 370, and polarisation in the region, altogether have failed SAARC in implementing its core objectives. Despite being dysfunctional for the last ten years, none of the member states have expressed any inclination towards disbanding the organisation. The identity of SAAARC being the only organisation representing all the South Asian states remains intact. Nevertheless, the lingering question pertains to how to proceed while navigating internal discord and addressing various structural flaws within the SAARC framework. So in view to deal with the current deadlock, the study puts forward some practical suggestions, especially in the context of Pakistan.

The Legacy of SAARC

Established in December 1985, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) began its journey with an ironclad commitment by its founding members including Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan to uplift the quality of life of the people living in a region

which was least integrated and one of the most poverty-ridden regions in the world. In its formative years, from 1985 to 1989, the SAARC Summits were held regularly and several important conventions were concluded in response to pressing issues of the time. For instance, the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism¹ and an agreement to establish a South Asian Food Reserve.² However, starting from 1989, the frequency of annual sessions began to decline. Over the span of 22 years, from 1989 to 2011, only 12 summits were convened. Subsequently, from 2011 to the present, spanning 13 years, only one summit took place, occurring in 2014.

The debilitating frequency of annual meetings speaks volumes about the inherent discords between the member states especially between India and Pakistan. The extra-regional power politics and the mushroom growth of sub-regional and trans-regional organisations have negatively impacted the progress of the SAARC. Practically, SAARC has been dysfunctional since 2014. Nevertheless, in a period of nearly a decade of dormancy, none of the member states has expressed any desire to disband the organization. All the states, especially the smaller states still have faith in the SAARC and are quite hopeful for its revival.

So, the importance of SAARC has remained impervious to the prevailing challenges. The establishment of SAARC Regional Centers, South Asian University, the South Asian Development Fund, the Food Bank, and the Arbitration Council, are some of the

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outstanding achievements that SAARC has made so far. But it is worth mentioning here that almost all the achievements that SAARC has made in the past 38 years, were made possible at a time when Pakistan-India relations were apparently normal. This implies that the normalisation of Pakistan-India relations is the key to the smooth functioning of SAARC, and there is no scope for either minus-India or minus-Pakistan-led growth within SAARC, a possibility which has been discussed causally in Pakistani and Indian literature.

Current Challenges

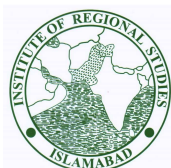
Revival of SAARC remains a daunting challenge in the contemporary geo-political and geo-strategic environment that has been potentially shaped by the so called China threat. The Galwan Valley face-off between the Chinese and the Indian forces in June 2020 and the subsequent push in India-US relations (which is evident from operationalising of the QUAD through a naval power show in November 2020)³ brought a paradigm shift in the strategic culture of South Asia. Later, the Ukraine War that broke out in February 2022, led to an increased polarisation in the South Asian region. Now, the divide is quite visible as the US and the like-minded Western powers are trying to consolidate their position in the region through strategic partnership with India and promoting its role as the 'net security provider' in the region. Mindful of the existing tide, China and Russia are trading cautiously in their bilateral engagements with the South Asian states.

The existing 'polarisation' has accentuated the division within the SAARC which was already paralysed because of two major incidents, i.e., the Uri attack on the Indian Army Brigade Headquarters in 2016, and the

revocation of Article 370 by India in 2019. Today, minus Pakistan, India is willing to work with other neighbours and it has already been doing so for quite a long time. Circumventing Pakistan, New Delhi is quite active in streamlining connectivity agreements under Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Network (BBIN)⁴ which was conceived after Pakistan objected India's proposed regional Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) as half-baked in the last summit in 2014 which took place in Kathmandu, Nepal.⁵ The same agreement was passed in 2015 under the BBIN platform and now it is in the final stage and ready for implementation soon. Apart from MVA, India is widening the scope of the BBIN through mulling cooperation on energy and trade. On the other hand, minus India, Pakistan prefers to work with other SAARC countries but Islamabad's efforts have been unsuccessful in fully exploiting its bilateral relations in this regard because of New Delhi's greater influence over the foreign policy decisions of the smaller states.

Moreover, due to existing acrimonious relationships between India and Pakistan, no cross-border regional connectivity mechanism especially related to energy and transportation could be operational under the SAARC framework. Practically, only bilateral/ Intergovernmental (G to G) mechanisms exist in the region. In almost all the existing bilateral mechanisms (especially in the energy sector) New Delhi is well connected with the smaller states of the region as compared to Pakistan. (India-Bangladesh 1160 MW, Bhutan-India 2260 MW, India-Nepal 520 MW, Pakistan-Afghanistan (CASA 1000 MW)).

Thus, the vision of economic integration under SAARC remains a challenge as India and Pakistan have opted for alternate,



more simply, opposing modes of integration within the South Asian region. For India, SAARC is no longer a significant component in India's Neighbourhood Policy. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC, a trans-regional organisation) has gained more significance. However, India is skillfully using the SAARC forum to advance her part of integration while circumventing Pakistan. The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Network (BBIN) is the prime example in that regard. Unfortunately, New Delhi has spoiled the SAARC's spirit of 'regionness'. New Delhi is now using the SAARC forum only to advance its two-pronged policy of isolating Pakistan and neutralising the impact of Chinese influence. Be it SAARC, the BBIN, or BIMSTEC, New Delhi has determined to play a central role. For Pakistan, though SAARC remains an important organisation in achieving the goal of regional cooperation in South Asia, yet Islamabad's increasing reliance on China-led development projects has largely shaped her image as a 'typical member' of the SAARC.

The Prospects

Despite several loopholes and the mushroom growth of other sub-regional organisations (i.e., BISMTECH and BBIN), SAARC's identity of being the only organisation representing all the South Asian countries remains intact. The smaller states, despite the existing polarisation in the region are still interested in the revival of SAARC which they believe can be potentially helpful in streamlining cooperation on less controversial issues such as poverty reduction, people-to-people contact, cultural exchanges, tourism, and science and technology cooperation.

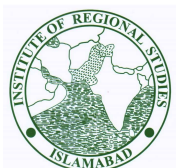
The alternative/opposing economic integration infrastructures could be integrated into the SAARC vision of economic integration if Pakistan-India relations are normalised. Moreover, in the absence of annual summits which have been in limbo since 2016, the regular meetings have gained more importance as the organisation is relatively alive and surviving on committee-level interactions between the member states.

SAARC is quite active since Ambassador Golam Sarwar from the People's Republic of Bangladesh assumed charged as the fifteenth Secretary General of SAARC on 25th October 2023.⁶ After 4 years, the 39th SAARC Charter Day was celebrated on 11 December 2023, and several Board of Governors' meetings of regional centers have been held so far. More recently, in the year 2024, the 31st meeting of the Governing Board of the SAARC TB and HIV/AIDS Centre was held in January.⁷

Conclusion

To tap the potential of existing synergy at the SAARC Secretariat, Islamabad needs to engage with the current Secretary General of SAARC, Ambassador Golam Sarwar. Pakistan can consider inviting him (virtually or in person) to conferences, seminars, etc. Former Secretary General Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon visited Pakistan in December 2021.⁸ Islamabad also needs to increase its engagements with the SAARC regional centers, and it should also be active on SAARC's social media platforms.

In its engagements with member countries, Pakistan should stress on the fulfilment of the social charter of the SAARC and also make efforts in mobilising the observer states to contribute to the SAARC Development Fund. Such kind of initiatives would help rebuild the confidence of the member states in



the SAARC. Pakistan also needs to take serious efforts for convening the pending SAARC Summit. For that matter, Islamabad needs an active engagement with the current chair of the SAARC (Nepal) as well as with other smaller states to mobilise their support in setting the ground for the summit in Islamabad. Previously, in 2018, the former PM of Pakistan, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi made an attempt in that regard. During his visit to Nepal, he met with the Prime Minister and the President of Nepal, K.P Shama Oli and Bidya Devei Bhandari, and other political figures and urged them to play their role in convening the SAARC Summit.

To address the emerging climate-related issues, Pakistan needs to stress the active role of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre. Based in India, the Centre can be exploited to have climate cooperation within the SAARC. Pakistan also needs to push for reforms in the SAARC Charter. Learning from other organisations like CAREC, the SAARC's institutional framework/decision-making process can be simplified. Multiple layers

(SAARC Summits (Apex Body), Council of Ministers, Standing Committees, Programming Committees, Technical Committees, Working Groups, and Action Committees) are potentially delaying the decision-making in the SAARC. Additionally, since Pakistan-India relations are the key to the revival of SAARC, both Pakistan and India need to expedite efforts to normalise their relations in the greater interest of the welfare of the people of South Asia.

In conclusion, Pakistan should not be kept hostage to the existing stalemate between India and Pakistan. Islamabad's continued inattentive attitude will provide New Delhi room for contemplating policies that are detrimental to Pakistan's relations with other smaller states. The forum of SAARC at this point in time needs to be fully utilised to neutralise India's policy of isolating Pakistan within the SAARC, and this can only be possible through active engagement with the member countries, as well as active participation in the meetings, and events.

Notes and References

- ¹ For details, read the convention available at SAARC's official website <SAARC REGIONAL CONVENTION ON SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM (SAARC-sec.org)>
- ² For details, read the agreement available at SAARC' official website <AGREEMENT ON ESTABLISHING (SAARC-sec.org)>.
- ³ Sheila A. Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know," *The Council of Foreign Relations*, 27 May 2021.
- ⁴ The South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) was launched in April 1997 by the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) which later endorsed as sub-regional initiative under SAARC in the Ninth Summit in Male, Maldives.
- ⁵ "South Asian leaders reach last minute energy deal at SAARC Summit," *Dawn*, 27 November 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1147270>.
- ⁶ Information gathered from the official website of the SAARC, www.saarc-sec.org.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Retrieved from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, SAARC Secretary-General's visit to Pakistan (mofa.gov.pk).