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**REVIVAL OF SAARC:
PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD**

**Razia Sultana
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Tahsin Binte Hasan**



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

biiss papers

Number 32

June 2025



**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)
Dhaka**

biiss papers

Number 32 June 2025

Published by

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)
1/46, Old Elephant Road, Ramna
Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh.

Subscription Rate

BDT 150.00/USD 15.00 (Air Mail Charge Extra)

For correspondence please contact

Publication Officer

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)
1/46, Old Elephant Road (West of Ramna Police Station)
Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh.

Phone: (880-2) PABX: 9353808, 9336287, 8315808, Ext.136
Fax: 8312625, e-mail: po@biiss.org, website: www.biiss.org

Printed by

General Printing Press

98, Naya Paltan, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh
Phone: +88 02 583 177 42, +88 01710 956 575
Email: general.ppress@gmail.com,
Website: www.generalppress.com

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Preface

Over the last decade, South Asian nations have witnessed a complex political transition marked by crucial upheavals. Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and most recently, Bangladesh have experienced a substantial political blow, including governance crisis, economic slowdowns, and civil unrest. Addressing these concerns requires concerted efforts and sustainable solutions. To facilitate a collaborative approach and navigate the current challenges in South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comes to the forefront as a crucial platform. SAARC has been considered a ‘beacon of hope’ for regional integration, cooperation, and development in the South Asian region. Since its inception in 1985, SAARC, through its mandate, has sought to foster a sense of unity and common purpose among its members, with each bringing its unique heritage and aspirations to the collective platform. SAARC’s promise lies in its potential to overcome the challenges that have historically divided the region and build a future characterised by shared prosperity and mutual respect among sovereign states.

However, the journey of SAARC has been wrought with obstacles. Structural inefficiencies, political rivalries, and economic disparities between and among member states have often overshadowed the noble objectives set forth by the founders through its mandate. Persistent Indo-Pak rivalry, coupled with chronic poverty and the influence of external powers, further compounded challenges for this organisation. The April 2025 Pahalgam incident has made the situation even more complex. Global economic downturns exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale conflicts like the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israel-Hamas War are also leaving their mark on the region. All these long-standing and newly emergent challenges point strongly towards an urgency for a robust and effective mechanism for regional cooperation.

Despite these formidable hurdles, the vision of a united and cooperative South Asia remains more relevant than ever. The inability to hold SAARC summits since 2014 has cast doubt on the organisation’s efficacy, especially when compared to the rising prominence of other regional entities like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This study, titled ‘Revival of SAARC: Prospects, Challenges, and Way Forward’, embarks on a comprehensive exploration of SAARC’s current state, identifying key impediments to its progress and offering a roadmap for its revival.

Through meticulous research and insightful analysis, this study delves into structural, strategic, economic, and political barriers that have stymied SAARC’s

growth. It highlights the external influences that have shaped the region's geopolitical landscape, and more crucially, it presents a compelling argument that, despite the odds, SAARC can still emerge as a viable and functional regional organisation. The prerequisite for this transformation, as can be garnered from this paper, is a renewed commitment from member states to overcome their differences and collaborate earnestly towards common goals that they, and SAARC as a whole, share. These common goals include fostering economic prosperity through trade integration and investment, addressing climate change and sustainable development, ensuring food and energy security, reducing poverty and socio-economic disparities. Additionally, promoting peace and stability, tackling non-traditional security challenges like terrorism, enhancing cultural cooperation and people-to-people connectivity remain pivotal.¹ Together, these objectives underline SAARC's potential to unite South Asia around shared aspirations.

This study serves not only as a critical examination of SAARC's past and present but also as a hopeful blueprint for its future direction. It discusses the need for enhanced cooperation, increased dialogue, and mutual understanding among South Asian nations. I strongly emphasise that the potential benefits of a revitalised SAARC are immense, as it can undoubtedly lead to promising economic growth, social progress, and regional stability. By reading through this monograph, I hope the reader gains a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play and the immense potential that lies within SAARC. Let this serve as a call to action for policymakers, scholars, and citizens alike to renew their faith in regional cooperation and to work collectively towards the revitalisation of SAARC. It is only through sustained effort and genuine collaboration that we can hope to realise the vision of a prosperous and peaceful South Asia.

Iftekhar Anis

Director General, BIISS

¹ Muhammad Muzaffar, Iqra Jathol and Zahid Yaseen, "SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures, and Compulsion for Cooperation," *Global Political Review* 2, no. 1 (2017): 36–45; Jham Kumar Bishwakarma and Zongshan Hu, "Problems and prospects for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)," *Politics & Policy* 50, no. 1 (2021): 154–179.

Acknowledgement

This monograph is prepared for the fulfilment of requirement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) concerning the relevance of SAARC, which has been a pressing question for quite some time in many circles. The authors assessed the bloc's viability and plethora of related issues from various angles, delving into its history and current and potential status in the face of ever-changing regional, global, and national dynamics of member states.

We thank the MoFA profoundly for coming up with this topic. Thanks also go to all key informants, who provided us with useful insights into the subject, managing time from their busy schedules. The editorial board deserves our gratitude for painstakingly going through the whole document. We hope our endeavour will rekindle the interest of policymakers, academics, and common people regarding SAARC and regional organisations in general.

Authors

Abstract

This monograph aims to provide a comprehensive overview of SAARC's revival, encompassing its current activities, challenges, and opportunities in light of South Asia's changing political and geostrategic dynamics and beyond. SAARC—a regional platform—was established in 1985 to fulfil the noble objectives of strengthening cooperation and fostering development among South Asian nations. Regrettably, the organisation has encountered various challenges to materialise its visions, which the member countries committed since its inception. Based on the expert interviews of South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), a number of issues have been identified as impeding factors for its progress, among which, structural, military, economic, and political are some noteworthy ones. Most importantly, power asymmetry, ongoing conflicts, Indo-Pak rivalry, and chronic poverty remain recurring hurdles for SAARC's success. The region, moreover, has not been free of influence from external factors, including global shifts in power structures. Furthermore, the global economic downturn emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, Russo-Ukrainian and Israel-Hamas wars are wreaking equal havoc, if not more. The April 2025 Pahalgam incident has brought the question to the forefront whether revival of SAARC is possible or not. Amidst such mounting odds, there are speculations by many whether SAARC can be revived or is even necessary at all. In the context of these formidable challenges and heightened uncertainty, the paper argues that SAARC can be an effective regional organisation if member countries become cordial to each other and extend their hands of cooperation, surpassing all the hurdles. Overall, the study is an attempt to highlight the prospects, challenges, and probable paths for the revitalisation of SAARC.

Keywords: SAARC Revitalisation, Regional Cooperation, South Asian Politics, People-to-People Connectivity, Geopolitical Dynamics.

List of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BBIN-MVA	Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CSA	Climate Smart Agriculture
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
C-SUCSeS	Consortium for Scaling-up Climate Smart Agriculture in South Asia
DU	University of Dhaka
EU	European Union
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNH	Gross National Happiness
HDI	Human Development Index
ICP	Integrated Check Post
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute

INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
IPA	Integrated Programme of Action
IPE	International Political Economy
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IR	International Relations
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LDC	Least Developed Countries
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NAES	National Agricultural Extension System
NARS	National Agricultural Research System
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCCs	National Coordination Committees
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OAU	Organization of the African Unity
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAC	SAARC Agriculture Centre
SARRND	SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters
SADKN	South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network
SAES	South Asia Economic Summit
SAFTA	South Asian Free Trade Area
SAME	SAARC Market of Electricity
SAPTA	South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement
SASEC	South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation
SATIS	SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services
SAU	State Agricultural University
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SCZMC	SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre
SDMC	SAARC Disaster Management Centre
SDF	SAARC Development Fund
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

SFC	SAARC Forestry Centre
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SMRC	SAARC Meteorological Research Centre
SRMTS	SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study
STORM	Severe Thunderstorm Observations and Regional Modelling
TPP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
ULFA	The United Liberation Front of Assam
UK	The United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
UNIDCP	United Nations International Drug Control Programme
USA	The United States of America

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past decade, South Asia has experienced a complex and dynamic political transition, with significant shifts occurring across the region. Countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, and Afghanistan have faced various political, economic, and social challenges, each navigating its trajectory of governance and reform. In Sri Lanka, political unrest and economic crises have triggered widespread protests and leadership changes. Bangladesh has seen remarkable economic growth, yet it continues to grapple with political polarisation and challenges to democratic governance, especially after its recent regime shift in the backdrop of its “anti-discrimination student movement” of July 2024. The Maldives and Nepal, both still maturing as democracies, have been undergoing political realignment. Afghanistan has undergone significant political changes following the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, and concerns persist regarding the lack of democratic governance, respect for human rights, and broader implications for regional security and cooperation. The country is struggling to reform its government structure, balance diplomatic recognition and regain its image in the world arena. Meanwhile, the recent flare-up between India and Pakistan following the Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025 reignited concerns over cross-border militancy and nuclear brinkmanship. The month-long military escalation, culminating in airstrikes and retaliatory operations,² further underscored the fragility of peace and stability in South Asia.

Amidst these developments, future of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has come into renewed focus. On August 26, 2024, the Chief Advisor of the Interim Government of Bangladesh remarked that SAARC could follow the “European model” of integration, emphasising the potential for deeper regional cooperation.³ He also urged Pakistan, a vital member of SAARC, to embrace unity within the framework to revitalise it as a vibrant mechanism for addressing South Asia’s shared challenges. As regional tensions and global shifts continue to evolve, SAARC’s potential to foster collaboration on issues like economic integration, climate change, and security has become more critical than ever.

² Sania Haroon, Muhammad Salman, Hina Butt and Sobia Hanif, “The 2025 Indo-Pakistan Crisis: From Pahalgam Attack to Ceasefire,” *ASSAJ* 3, no. 02 (2025): 748–755.

³ “Dr Yunus for reviving SAARC spirit for solving regional issues,” *The Prothom Alo*, September 06, 2024.

Also, in an era marked by globalisation and interdependence, regional cooperation stands as a cornerstone for addressing shared challenges and fostering mutual prosperity. SAARC, established in 1985, represents a significant initiative aimed at strengthening regional integration and cooperation among the South Asian nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The inception of SAARC was driven by a collective vision to enhance regional well-being, economic growth, and socio-cultural development through cooperative endeavours. This regional bloc, grounded in shared history and overlapping cultural ties to one another, had been envisaged as a platform for these countries to collaborate on various fronts, address common challenges and capitalise on their mutual strengths. Towards this end, the formation of SAARC marked a memorable moment in South Asia's history, symbolising a departure from the region's tumultuous past marked by colonialism, partition, and conflicts.

As a regional organisation, it represented a strong step towards forging a new identity based on cooperation, mutual respect, and shared aspirations for prosperity. At its core, SAARC embodies the principles of sovereignty, equality, and non-interference, fostering an environment conducive to dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building among members. After its establishment, SAARC's continued operations and initiatives reflected a growing recognition among South Asian leaders of the need for regional cooperation to address pressing socio-economic challenges and, thus, harness the region's immense potential. This region shares a combined population exceeding 1.8 billion people alongside a diverse array of natural resources, human capital, and cultural heritage,⁴ and with that, possesses the ingredients for dynamic economic growth and social progress. However, the region also grapples with significant development disparities, political instability, and transnational threats that require collective action and solidarity to overcome them.

Notably, among various regional organisations, SAARC occupies a prominent position because of its key focus on promoting economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in South Asia. The organisation emerged against the backdrop of a growing recognition among South Asian nations of the need for collective action to address common socio-economic challenges and promote regional

⁴ M Arul Kumar, "India's Foreign Trade Performance among SAARC Countries," in *India's Foreign Trade Performance among SAARC Countries*, eds. Arul Kumar and S Gopalsamy (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2021), 42–99, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3966469>.

stability.⁵ Towards that end, SAARC's Charter envisions cooperation in various areas, including agriculture, trade, technology, and environmental conservation.⁶ The significance of SAARC's role thus far cannot be overstated, given the diverse socio-economic landscape and geopolitical dynamics of the South Asian region. SAARC represents a unique platform for fostering cooperation among South Asian nations, with the potential to address pressing issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental degradation, and regional security.⁷ Despite its initial promise and the ambitious goals set forth at its inception, SAARC has encountered numerous challenges that have severely hindered its effectiveness, particularly in the aftermath of key geopolitical developments. These include the nuclearisation of India and Pakistan in the late 1990s, the fallout from the Kargil War in 1999, the Mumbai attacks in 2008, and, more recently, the implications of China's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative through the disputed Kashmir region. Additionally, the intensification of regional tensions since the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to power in India has further strained the organisation's ability to foster meaningful cooperation. These obstacles have significantly limited its impact on regional integration and development. These (and the challenges they represent) are multifaceted and complex, spanning various dimensions that collectively undermine the organisation's potential.

Among the most prominent of these are political tensions and historical animosities that persist between and among key member states. These have often spilled over into the functioning of SAARC, creating mistrust and reluctance to engage in collaborative efforts. The deep-seated political rivalries and conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan, frequently stalled progress and led to paralysis in decision-making processes within the organisation.⁸ Institutional inefficiencies further exacerbated these problems. The organisational structure of SAARC, which requires consensus among all members for decision-making, has often resulted in a deadlock, making it difficult to implement policies and initiatives

⁵ Mavara Inayet, *The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2007), 12–24, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2007/sipri-policy-papers/regionalism-south-asian-diplomacy>.

⁶ Q K Ahmad, "SAARC: Envisioning the future," *South Asian Survey* 9, no. 2 (2002): 187–199.

⁷ Jham Kumar Bishwakarma and Zongshan Hu, "Problems and prospects for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)," *Politics & Policy* 50, no. 1 (2021): 154–179.

⁸ Muhammad Idrees and Manzoor Naazir and Shughla Ashfaq, "Conflicts and conflict management in SAARC: Assessing Challenges and the Way Forward," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1–11.

effectively.⁹ Unlike the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has navigated its consensus-driven model with relative success, SAARC's challenges stem from the politically charged and deeply divisive bilateral issues among its members.¹⁰ Often politicised at the regional level, these disputes overshadow the organisation's agenda and hinder collaboration.

In contrast, ASEAN nations have prioritised economic cooperation as a unifying force, enabling them to maintain a functional balance despite differing political systems and occasional disagreements.¹¹ This focus on economic integration allowed ASEAN to achieve significant progress, whereas SAARC has faltered. This requirement for unanimous agreement means that even a single dissenting member can block proposals, leading to a situation where desired progress is simply halted by the lack of consensus. Such difference in their nature rendered SAARC unable to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging challenges and opportunities, thereby diminishing its relevance and efficacy as a regional organisation.

In addition to political and institutional challenges, SAARC has struggled with a lack of consensus among its members on key issues which extends beyond political matters and includes economic policies, security strategies, and developmental priorities. Divergent interests and priorities of member states have made it difficult to forge a cohesive and unified approach to regional cooperation.¹² As a result, many initiatives have either been diluted in their scope or abandoned altogether, further limiting the organisation's ability to achieve its stated objectives. The cumulative effect of these tensions, animosities, inefficiencies, and lack of consensus has been a significant limitation to SAARC's capacity to foster regional integration and development thus far. Despite the potential for considerable benefits through enhanced cooperation, these challenges repeatedly thwarted efforts towards building a more integrated and prosperous South Asia. SAARC has not been able to fully realise its vision of regional harmony and collective progress, and much of its potential remains untapped.

⁹ Abdul Majid, "SAARC prospects and challenges," *South Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2018): 185–197.

¹⁰ Farhana Kousar, "The Impact of Nationalism on Saarc's Cohesion and Functionality; a Critical Analysis," *Advance Social Science Archive Journal* 2, no. 4 (2024): 73–83.

¹¹ Koichi Ishikawa, "The ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN economic integration," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 1 (2021): 24–41.

¹² Idrees, Naazer and Ashfaq, "Conflicts and conflict management in SAARC".

Hence, in the contemporary geopolitical landscape, marked by shifting power dynamics, growing economic interdependence, and transnational challenges such as climate change, migration, and regional security threats, the revival of SAARC holds importance for several reasons. First and foremost, South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, with intra-regional trade accounting for a mere five per cent of total trade, significantly lower than other regional blocs such as the ASEAN or the European Union (EU).¹³ Enhancing regional cooperation through SAARC could have unlocked (and still can) economic opportunities, fostered greater trade ties, and stimulated economic growth across member states.¹⁴ Second, South Asia is confronted with a myriad of transnational challenges, including poverty, terrorism, climate change, and natural disasters, which require collective action and cooperation among neighbouring countries.¹⁵ SAARC, with its institutional framework and regional platform, has the potential to facilitate coordinated responses to these challenges, thereby promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in the region. Finally, its revival is imperative in the context of emerging geopolitical dynamics, which have been characterised by increasing competition and influence from external powers in the South Asian region.¹⁶ Strengthening intra-regional cooperation through SAARC can help mitigate influence of external actors and safeguard the sovereignty and interests of member states. However, differing perspectives among SAARC countries regarding the role of external powers, such as Pakistan's alignment with China or India's strategic partnerships with the United States of America (USA), present a significant hindrance.¹⁷ These divergent views often exacerbate bilateral tensions and complicate consensus-building within SAARC, underscoring the need for a balanced approach that prioritises shared regional interests over external alignments.

The current context of SAARC reflects a prolonged period of dormancy, with the last summit held in 2014. Since its inception, it has grappled with the longstanding India-Pakistan rivalry, a persistent issue rooted in their histories of independence and conflict. In recent years, however, escalating tensions and new geopolitical realities have deepened the organisation's challenges, stalling its ability to convene member states effectively. These challenges are compounded by rapid socio-economic and

¹³ Asif Javed, "South Asia's Services Trade: Barriers and Prospects for Integration," *International Journal of Management, Accounting & Economics* 6, no. 10 (2019): 752–760.

¹⁴ Bhumitra Chakma, "Beyond SAARC: Sub-Regional and Trans-Regional Cooperation," in *South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation*, ed. Bhumitra Chakma (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), 121–136.

¹⁵ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, *Regionalism and regional security in South Asia: The role of SAARC* (Singapore: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁶ Chakma, "Beyond SAARC".

¹⁷ Zulfqar Khan, "Strategic Conundrum of US–China and India–Pakistan: A Perspective," *Margalla Papers* 20, no. 1 (2016): 37–61.

strategic shifts within South Asia, including China's growing regional presence and the increasing polarisation in global geopolitics. In this context, Bangladesh's recent political changes, marked by a shift in leadership and renewed emphasis on regional connectivity following the anti-discrimination student movement of 2024, present an opportunity to revisit and potentially revitalise the SAARC agenda. This evolving political landscape highlights the urgency of reassessing SAARC's role in promoting cooperation and addressing shared challenges amidst these pressing dynamics.

1.2 SAARC: A Brief Overview

SAARC, as mentioned before, was established on 08 December 1985 with the primary aim of promoting regional integration and cooperation among the eight member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Figure 1.1). Although the initial number of member states was seven, Afghanistan joined in 2007, increasing the membership to eight. The approach of membership is highly restrictive because of the prerequisites of unanimous decision-making.

Figure 1.1: Members of SAARC¹⁸



¹⁸ Venkhat G and Sobia Hamid Bhat, "SAARC and India-Pakistan Relations: Mutual Interdependence and Future Prospects," August 29, 2022, <https://southasiajournal.net/saarc-and-india-pakistan-relations-mutual-interdependence-and-future-prospects/>.

Apart from full membership, the Association also includes a total of nine observers at different times, such as China and Japan (2005); the EU, South Korea and the USA (2006); Mauritius (2007); and Iran, Australia and Myanmar (2008). Besides, Indonesia, Turkey, and Russia applied for observer status, while China showed deep interest in attaining full-fledged membership. SAARC is deeply engaged with numerous regional and international entities through the signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) such as the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), etc.

Over the years, SAARC has undertaken several initiatives and established various institutions to achieve its objectives. Key agreements and frameworks among these include the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), aimed at reducing tariffs and promoting trade within the region, and the SAARC Development Fund (SDF), aimed at supporting projects in social, economic, and infrastructure sectors.¹⁹ Additionally, SAARC fostered collaboration through various technical committees and working groups focused on specific areas such as health, education, and the environment.²⁰ It played a significant role in promoting cultural exchange and people-to-people contact among members. Initiatives towards those ends, such as the SAARC Cultural Centre and the SAARC Documentation Centre, aim to preserve and promote the diverse cultural heritage of South Asia,²¹ thereby fostering a sense of shared identity and understanding among the peoples of the region. SAARC festivals, film festivals, and youth exchange programmes provide platforms for cultural expression and interaction,²² thereby contributing to greater social cohesion and mutual appreciation. SAARC has recognised the importance of addressing challenges that transcend national borders. Efforts to combat issues such as poverty alleviation, food security, and disaster management have been central to SAARC's agenda.

¹⁹ Smruti S Pattanaik, Medha Bisht and Kartik Bommakanti, *SAARC: A journey through history* (New Delhi: Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, 2010).

²⁰ Dwarika Dhungel, "South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC): Prospects for Development," *The Pakistan Development Review* 43, no. 4 (2004): 933–941.

²¹ Pattanaik, Bisht and Bommakanti, "SAARC: A journey through history".

²² Denise Venturi and Silvia Venier, "SAARC Areas of Cooperation," in *The Asian Yearbook of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, eds. Matthias Vanhullebusch, Steve Foster and Ben Stanford (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2018): 480–490.

Towards this particular end, establishment of the SAARC Food Bank²³ and the SAARC Disaster Management Centre²⁴ reflects the organisation's commitment to collective action in responding to humanitarian crises and natural disasters. By pooling resources and expertise, its members have been able to coordinate more effectively in times of need, demonstrating the potential for regional cooperation to address common challenges. Furthermore, it has sought to promote connectivity and infrastructure development within the region to facilitate trade, investment, and people-to-people linkages. Projects such as SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study and SAARC Regional Power Exchange Programme²⁵ aim to enhance connectivity and energy cooperation and pursue this aforesaid promotion of connectivity and development. Initiatives to develop regional transportation corridors and improve cross-border infrastructure were prioritised²⁶ to unlock the economic potential of South Asia and promote greater integration.

Despite achievements, as mentioned earlier, SAARC continues to face significant challenges that impede its effectiveness as a regional organisation. Persistent political tensions and bilateral disputes among members have often hindered progress on regional cooperation initiatives.²⁷ The India-Pakistan rivalry, in particular, has cast a shadow over its functioning, leading to the postponement or cancellation of several summits.²⁸ Moreover, structural limitations, including the principle of consensus-based decision-making and lack of supranational authority, as previously touched upon in the background section, constrained SAARC's ability to address pressing regional issues effectively.²⁹ Absence of a dispute resolution

²³ Mustafizur Rahman, Estiaque Bari and Sherajum Monira Farin, *SAARC Food Bank (SFB): Institutional architecture and issues of operationalisation* (Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2017).

²⁴ Sharad Lamichhane, "Enhancing SAARC disaster management: a comparative study with ASEAN coordinating centre for humanitarian assistance on disaster management," PhD dissertation (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2016).

²⁵ Ghulam Mohd Malikyar et al., *SAARC regional energy trade study (SRETS)* (Kathmandu, Nepal: SAARC Secretariat, 2010), https://www.sasec.asia/uploads/publications/srets_a.pdf.

²⁶ Prabir De, "Connectivity and regional co-operation in South Asia," in *Regional Integration in South Asia: Trends, Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Mohammad A. Razzaque (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014), 185–213.

²⁷ Rajiv Kumar, *SAARC: Changing Realities, Opportunities and Challenges* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011).

²⁸ Rehman Sobhan, "The Twelfth SAARC Summit: charting a road map for South Asian cooperation," *South Asian Survey* 12, no. 1 (2005): 3–19.

²⁹ Bhumitra Chakma, "SAARC and the Limits of Cooperation in South Asia," in *South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation*, ed. Bhumitra Chakma (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), 137–154.

mechanism has further exacerbated tensions and hindered cooperation among member states.³⁰

A major area of criticism has been the organisation's inability to effectively address transnational challenges that are of critical importance to the South Asian region. Issues such as terrorism, poverty, and natural disasters have for a long time been pervasive and solving them effectively always required coordinated regional responses. And yet SAARC has often been found lacking in that regard, in its capacity to mobilise member states towards collective action on these fronts.³¹ Terrorism, for instance, continues to remain a significant threat in the region, with various member states facing security challenges that transcend national borders. However, political differences and mutual distrust among members hampered collaborative efforts (or proposals to undertake them) to combat this menace, resulting in fragmented and ineffective responses.

Similarly, persistent poverty in South Asia, which houses a significant portion of the world's impoverished population, underscores another area where SAARC's impact has been limited. The organisation's initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation have often been criticised for their lack of depth and reach, with many programmes failing to translate into meaningful improvements in the lives of the region's poor. Disparities in economic development and resource distribution among member states further complicate efforts to implement uniform strategies for poverty reduction, leading to uneven progress and dissatisfaction with SAARC's role in addressing this fundamental challenge. Natural disasters, which are frequent and devastating in the South Asian region, present yet another critical challenge that has highlighted SAARC's shortcomings. The region is prone to a range of natural calamities, including earthquakes, floods, and cyclones, which require swift and coordinated responses to mitigate their impact. However, SAARC's mechanisms for disaster management and response have often been criticised for their inefficiency and lack of preparedness. Slow mobilisation of resources, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate coordination among member states have impeded effective disaster response and recovery efforts, leaving affected populations vulnerable and underserved. These shortcomings have underscored the urgent need for institutional reforms and revitalisation efforts within SAARC. To remain relevant and effective, the organisation must undergo significant changes that enhance its ability to address these transnational challenges. Slow pace of progress and limited tangible outcomes

³⁰ Idrees, Naazer and Ashfaq, "Conflicts and conflict management in SAARC".

³¹ Bishwakarma and Hu, "Problems and prospects".

have led to a growing discourse on the necessity of reinvigorating SAARC to better serve the interests of its member states and their populations.

1.3 Problem Statement

Currently, SAARC countries are grappling with multifaceted challenges amid ongoing political transitions. Political instability, governance breakdown, democratic crisis, civil unrest, and social tension all have significant influences on their economy and overall development. Unfortunately, no regional framework works comprehensively to address these immediate challenges. Although SAARC has struggled to achieve its objectives, it is becoming largely passive, if not outright inactive, in 2024. This stagnation is evidenced by the absence of summits since 2014 and the recurring inability to address and resolve critical regional issues effectively. Lack of progress is attributed to a multitude of intertwined factors, including deep-rooted political conflicts, particularly the India-Pakistan rivalry, structural weaknesses, and the overarching influence of nationalistic agendas that overshadow collective regional interests.

SAARC's inability to adapt and respond to the dynamic geopolitical and socio-economic landscape of South Asia further eroded its operational ineffectiveness. The region faces significant challenges such as economic disparity, security threats, environmental degradation, and socio-political instability. These necessitate a coordinated regional approach, yet SAARC's current structure and functioning are inadequate to facilitate such cooperation. Its framework, which restricts engagement in bilateral disputes and lacks enforcement mechanisms, has rendered it ineffective in fostering meaningful dialogue and collaboration. Although this may seem contradictory—highlighting SAARC's passivity while acknowledging its structural limitations—they represent two sides of the same coin. SAARC's inactivity thus far reflects its inability to rise above deep-rooted challenges, which are exacerbated by its framework that restricts intervention in bilateral disputes and lacks robust enforcement mechanisms. These structural shortcomings have rendered the organisation incapable of fostering the meaningful dialogue and collaboration needed to address the pressing challenges of the region. In essence, SAARC's passivity is not an isolated phenomenon but a manifestation of its systemic inefficiencies, which prevent it from realising its objectives and adapting to the evolving geopolitical and socio-economic landscape of South Asia.

In recent years, the geopolitical landscape of South Asia has undergone substantial transformations, influenced by the strategic interests of major global powers such as China and the USA. This heightened the strategic importance of the region, especially concerning the Indian Ocean, thereby adding new dimensions to

the challenges and opportunities that SAARC is facing. The recent military confrontation in 2025 between India and Pakistan has further strained regional cooperation, revealing how bilateral tensions can paralyse SAARC's decision-making mechanisms.³² Such conflicts undermine trust and make it increasingly difficult to foster the spirit of regionalism that SAARC was originally envisioned to uphold. The emergence of non-traditional security threats, including environmental degradation, terrorism, and human trafficking, also necessitates a coordinated regional response, further highlighting the need for a functional and cohesive SAARC.

Sub-regional groupings and alternative multilateral forums have diluted SAARC's relevance and influence. These entities have often filled the vacuum left by SAARC, addressing regional needs more effectively but also contributing to the fragmentation of regional cooperation.³³ There are also concerns regarding the overlapping interests of member states with other regional and international organisations, which has diluted its focus. Examples of this include India's involvement in initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Pakistan's engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which demonstrates a diversification of regional engagement beyond SAARC. These parallel memberships often lead to competing priorities and limited commitment to SAARC initiatives, undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of the organisation.³⁴ Additionally, bilateral and sub-regional arrangements (such as India-Nepal or India-Bangladesh bilateral cooperation frameworks) have at times overshadowed SAARC's collective efforts,³⁵ further fragmenting regional cooperation in South Asia.

This undermines the potential for a unified regional strategy, which is essential for addressing common challenges and harnessing collective strengths. The situation is further complicated by external geopolitical pressures, particularly the strategic interests of major powers such as China and the USA in the Indian Ocean region. These created an environment of competition and rivalry, diverting attention from regional cooperation to strategic manoeuvring. External interference regularly

³² Haroon, Salman, Butt and Hanif, "The 2025 Indo-Pakistan Crisis"; Kriti Vashishtha, Charu Dhankar, Shraddha Tripathi and Ruchi Joshi, "Pahalgam attack: a reflection of escalating tensions in South Asia's geopolitical landscape," *The Round Table* (2025): 1–3.

³³ Chakma, "Beyond SAARC".

³⁴ Saphala Dhital, *Economic Regionalism: Analyzing the Role of China for Economic Cooperation in South Asia through SAARC* (PhD dissertation, Department of International Relations & Diplomacy, Tribhuvan University, 2019).

³⁵ Indraneel Baruah, "An analysis of regional integration in South Asia," in *The Changing Global Order: Challenges and Prospects*, eds. Madeleine O Hosli and Joren Selleslaghs (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 247–273.

exacerbates internal divisions, making consensus and collective action within SAARC even more elusive.

Given these multifaceted challenges, it is realised that there is an urgent need to re-evaluate and revitalise SAARC. The organisation must transform to become more agile, inclusive, and effective in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats, economic integration, and socio-cultural cooperation. These require a comprehensive strategy which not only addresses the structural and operational deficiencies but also leverages the unique strengths and opportunities within the region. The problem statement for this study thus centres on understanding the specific issues that have stagnated SAARC, identifying potential areas for enhancing its effectiveness and exploring actionable pathways for revival. The goal is to provide a strategic framework that can guide SAARC towards becoming a functional and influential regional organisation capable of fostering sustainable development, peace, and prosperity in South Asia.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study aims to discuss the current status of SAARC, along with discerning its key challenges and analysing potential areas where it can enhance its effectiveness as a regional grouping. Keeping this in mind, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- To identify and analyse potential areas where SAARC can enhance its effectiveness as a regional organisation;
- To critically assess the historical and political factors limiting SAARC's operational efficacy, thereby uncovering deeper insights into the structural and systemic barriers that hinder its effectiveness; and
- To explore and propose innovative and context-specific frameworks and strategies that address these barriers and offer a roadmap for SAARC's revitalisation.

The study seeks to pinpoint the sectors and initiatives where SAARC's intervention could yield the most significant benefits for its member states. By focusing on areas with the highest potential for positive impact, the study aims to provide a roadmap for targeted improvements that can drive regional integration and cooperation. Another key objective is to examine and assess the issues and challenges hindering SAARC's operational effectiveness. This involves a detailed exploration of the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that contributed to the current state of dysfunction within SAARC. Understanding these challenges is critical to developing strategies that can address the root causes of SAARC's inefficacy and

pave the way for its revitalisation. The study also aims to explore and propose actionable pathways for SAARC to overcome its current challenges and emerge as an effective regional organisation. This involves formulating practical and feasible recommendations based on best practices from other regional organisations, as well as innovative solutions tailored to the unique context of South Asia. The goal is to provide a clear and actionable plan involving multidimensional strategies that can guide policymakers and stakeholders in their efforts to reinvigorate SAARC.

1.5 Key Research Questions

The following questions will guide the investigation into the challenges SAARC is facing and potential pathways for its revival, as per the objectives mentioned above:

- In what potential areas can SAARC enhance its effectiveness as a regional organisation?
- What are the issues and challenges impeding SAARC's operational effectiveness?
- What probable pathways can SAARC pursue to overcome its existing challenges and emerge as a more effective regional organisation?

The first question seeks to uncover specific sectors and initiatives where SAARC can play a more impactful role. It involves identifying opportunities for enhancing regional cooperation in areas such as trade, security, cultural exchange, environmental sustainability, and human capital development. By understanding where SAARC can add the most value, the study aims to highlight strategic priorities that can drive the organisation's revival and increased relevance.

The second question aims to delve into the various obstacles that have impeded SAARC's functioning. It requires a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic, and social barriers that have hindered collaboration among member states. This includes exploring bilateral conflicts, nationalistic policies, structural inefficiencies, and external geopolitical pressures. By thoroughly examining these issues, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that need to be addressed to make SAARC a functional and effective organisation.

The third research question is focused on identifying actionable solutions to the challenges identified. It involves proposing specific strategies and initiatives that SAARC can implement to overcome its current obstacles. This includes recommendations for structural reforms, policy changes, and new cooperative ventures that can enhance SAARC's operational capacity. The goal is to outline a clear and practical roadmap for SAARC's revival, drawing on both regional and

global best practices to ensure the organisation's long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

1.6 Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale for this study is underscored by three critical factors shaping contemporary regional dynamics and necessitating a reassessment of SAARC— a need for enhanced people-to-people connectivity, a shifting geopolitical landscape, and competition from alternative regional organisations.³⁶ It is significantly related to the growing need to enhance people-to-people connectivity among South Asian countries, especially in light of recent socio-political developments. South Asia, home to over a quarter of the global population, has seen rapid changes in governance, economic growth, and civil movements. In Bangladesh, the recent anti-discrimination student movement highlights the power of grassroots activism and the potential for young people to shape more inclusive and equitable societies. These civil actions are an essential element in fostering solidarity among the people of South Asia, cutting across borders and traditional political divides. In this context, SAARC, with its potential for fostering cultural and social collaboration, must harness these grassroots energies. The recent remarks of Bangladesh's Chief Advisor on SAARC adopting a “European model” underscore the importance of deepening regional cooperation.³⁷ Enhancing people-to-people connectivity can provide the foundation for a more integrated South Asia, allowing citizens to engage directly in dialogue, shared learning, and joint initiatives. This study is, therefore, significant in exploring the mechanisms that can bridge the cultural and societal gaps in the region, empowering people to collectively address common challenges like discrimination, inequality, and regional instability.

The significance of studying SAARC is manifold. Firstly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated existing socio-economic disparities within the region but also highlighted the imperative for regional cooperation in addressing transnational challenges. Secondly, SAARC's genesis during a bipolar era contrast sharply with the current transition to a multipolar global scenario, characterised by a lack of explicit alignments and the emergence of new power dynamics. This transition demands a reframing of SAARC's roles and responsibilities as a regional organisation to effectively navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape. Finally, SAARC faces stiff competition from other regional organisations, both within and outside, vying for

³⁶ Nausheen Wasi, “Beyond Infrastructure: Redefining Connectivity Discourse in South Asia,” *Pakistan Horizon* 78, no. 1 (2025): 45–64; Srinivasa Madhur, “SAARC—Time to Change,” *Indian Public Policy Review* 4, no. 2 (2023): 75–91.

³⁷ “Chief Advisor Dr. Muhammad Yunus Calls for Revival of SAARC to Boost Regional Cooperation,” Voice7 News, August 28, 2024, <https://www.voice7news.tv/public/bangladesh/news/8701>.

influence and resources. Against this backdrop, understanding the challenges and opportunities for SAARC's revival is paramount to harnessing its potential as a catalyst for regional integration, peace, and prosperity in South Asia.

Now, after more than three decades, pertinent questions persist: Why are we vying for a revival of SAARC? Is there any relevance of SAARC in addressing the complex challenges of contemporary times? Studying SAARC assumes importance considering a myriad of reasons. For example, in South Asia, studying SAARC is an important attempt to foster collaboration in a number of areas such as economics, culture, and technology, among others that were seen strongly in earlier summits (Table 1.1). The list of major initiatives undertaken by SAARC indicates the necessity of convening summits again to make the organisation effective.

Table 1.1 Major Initiatives Taken in SAARC Summits³⁸

Year	Place/Country of SAARC Summits	Major Initiatives Taken
1985	Dhaka, Bangladesh	A three-year MoU on Ganges water sharing between Bangladesh and India
1986	Bangalore, India	Discussion on a peace agreement between India and Sri Lanka on Tamil insurgency
1988	Islamabad, Pakistan	Informal meeting on the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme launched in 1992
1998	Colombo, Sri Lanka	Direct consultation on post-nuclear test between India and Pakistan
2002	Kathmandu, Nepal	Restarting dialogue between India and Pakistan after the Kargil War and the establishment of SAARC Food Bank
2004	Islamabad, Pakistan	A decision was taken about the South Asian energy ring to enhance collaboration
2005	Dhaka, Bangladesh	The signing of the SAARC Social Charter and a decision was taken about setting up the SAARC Disaster Management Centre

³⁸ Serena Hussain, Vishal Sharma and Beena Sarwar, "As SAARC Approaches Ten Years Without a Summit, Whither Regional Cooperation in South Asia?" *The Wire*, last modified July 13, 2024, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/regional-cooperation-south-asia-saarc>; also, the information is collected from different sources by the authors.

2007	New Delhi, India	An agreement was signed about establishing the South Asian University
2008	Colombo, Sri Lanka	Consensus on giving a lead position to each member country in a regional project
2010	Thimphu, Bhutan	Establishment of SAARC Development Fund
2011	Addu, Maldives	Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters
2014	Kathmandu, Nepal	Welcoming the progress of the SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement and SAARC Regional Railway Agreement

Besides, because of its strategic location and economic potential, South Asia as a region holds significance for understanding regional power struggles, impacts of the presence of external actors, and relationships of members. Besides, the concerns of any South Asian member have a spillover effect in neighbouring countries. It was evident in the recent mass uprising in Bangladesh that has repercussions in India and Pakistan. Thus, researching this subject will facilitate a nuanced understanding of various dynamics of regional concerns and cooperation.

By and large, the overarching aim of SAARC is to augment economic integration among members through initiatives like the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) and the SAFTA. It is anticipated that Bangladesh is going to lose its trade-related facilities once it graduates from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the progress and challenges of SAARC is imperative to overcome trade barriers, boost infrastructure development and reduce economic disparities among members. SAARC also serves as a facilitator for social and cultural exchange among the member countries, thereby promoting diverse cultural narratives and societal amalgamation. Conducting research on SAARC enables scholars to delve into the realm of cultural diplomacy, the cultivation of people-to-people connectivity and the promotion of regional solidarity. This monograph aims to address this pressing need by providing a comprehensive analysis of SAARC's current state and proposing actionable strategies for its revitalisation.

1.7 Organisation of the Monograph

This monograph is structured to provide a thorough and systematic examination of SAARC, focusing on its current challenges and potential pathways for revival. Each section builds upon the previous one to develop a comprehensive understanding of SAARC's operational dynamics and prospects.

The ‘**Introduction**’ in Chapter One sets the stage by outlining the historical context and significance of SAARC in promoting regional integration among South Asian countries. It highlights the bloc’s goals, its achievements over the years, and the pressing need for its revitalisation in light of contemporary challenges and geopolitical shifts. This section also introduces the research objectives and questions that guide the study.

Following this, the ‘**Literature Review**’ in Chapter Two delves into existing scholarly works on SAARC, covering various perspectives on its successes, failures, and potential. This section critically analyses previous studies and identifies gaps in the literature, particularly those related to recent developments and emerging regional dynamics. By doing so, it sets the foundation for subsequent analysis and highlights the unique contribution of this research.

The ‘**Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodology**’ in Chapter Three provides theoretical understandings and explains methodological tools employed in the study. It briefly highlights key theories of International Relations (IR) that explain regional cooperation and integration. In this chapter, the methods and techniques used in this study are also highlighted.

Chapter Four, titled ‘**The Achievements of SAARC**’, chronicles the successes and milestones of the organisation since its inception. It examines various initiatives and projects that have been successfully implemented under SAARC’s aegis, showcasing its potential and capability to foster regional cooperation. This analysis underscores the foundational strengths that can be built upon in the efforts to revitalise SAARC.

In contrast, the discussion of ‘**The Challenges of SAARC**’ in Chapter Five addresses the numerous obstacles that hinder its progress. This includes an exploration of political conflicts, structural inefficiencies, economic disparities, and external geopolitical pressures that have collectively contributed to SAARC’s current state of dysfunction. By identifying these challenges, this section provides a clear understanding of the issues that need to be addressed to enable SAARC’s effective functioning.

Chapter Six on ‘**SAARC’s Revival: Probable Path**’ proposes an analytical model relevant to regional cooperation and integration, such as the proposed “10-S Revival Model.” This framework serves as a lens through which the research findings are interpreted, offering a structured approach to understanding the factors influencing SAARC’s effectiveness and the strategies for its revival. The chapter also presents the core findings from the Key Informant Interviews (KII) conducted with regional experts and policymakers. This section synthesises these insights to propose

actionable pathways for overcoming the identified challenges. It discusses the potential strategies for enhancing SAARC's operational capacity, fostering regional cooperation, and leveraging soft-power approaches to build trust and mutual understanding among member states.

Finally, the '**Discussion and Conclusions**' in Chapter Seven integrates the findings from the literature review, conceptual framework, and KIIs to provide a cohesive narrative on SAARC's future. It discusses the implications of the research for policymakers and stakeholders, offering concrete recommendations for the revitalisation of SAARC. This section also reflects on the broader significance of regional cooperation in South Asia, considering both the potential benefits and the critical steps needed to achieve them. Lastly, the study concludes by adding the role of Bangladesh, in particular, in the revitalisation of SAARC.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of existing scholarship related to SAARC and regional cooperation initiatives within South Asia. In this chapter, various issues are addressed pertinent to SAARC's ongoing activities and its successes and failures. The chapter is an attempt to address why, to some extent, SAARC has been unable to achieve its stipulated goals, notwithstanding the organisation's considerable potential and initial pledges among the member countries. The chapter then contextualises SAARC's challenges by highlighting some exemplary cases of regional organisations which are functioning well at present. By mentioning the good instances of regional cooperation, it highlights the operational mechanism and key strategies which have facilitated the efficacy of these regional organisations. This comparative analysis tries to find out the key research gaps that make SAARC dysfunctional. The literature concerning this study is divided into three categories: identifying challenges and prime reasons for SAARC's inactiveness, exploring potential areas of revival in the present context, and providing recommendations for SAARC revival.

2.1 Why was SAARC Functional Before? Why not Now?

Several studies have recognised the factors contributing to the inactivity of SAARC as a regional organisation. Pachori, for instance, held the conflicts in South Asia responsible for challenging regionalism.³⁹ While Saleem⁴⁰ acknowledged the long-standing animosity between India and Pakistan as the biggest challenge of SAARC, Pachori argues it is not only the rivalry between these two countries but also some unresolved issues that exist among all states in South Asia that hinder regional cooperation. On the list of challenges, Sharon, Liaqat, and Khalil pointed out a completely different reason.⁴¹ They claim that due to Article X (2) of SAARC, member states do not engage in solving bilateral issues. This resulted in rifts between

³⁹ Dr Sunita Pachori, "Conflicts in South Asia – Challenges to SAARC Regionalism," *International Journal of Research in Geography* 5, no. 1, (2019).

⁴⁰ Ahmed Saleem, "Towards Expanded Regional Cooperation," *Policy Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (2012): 15–20

⁴¹ Osama Sharoon, Dr Bilal Bin Liaqat and Aized Khalil, "Assessing the Obstacles to Regional Integration for Development, Governance and Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the SAARC and the European Union," *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2023): 27–37.

them as there was a lack of accountability. Mishra, walking down the same path, also emphasised different issues of SAARC's ineffectiveness such as the absence of good governance, environmental concerns, and so forth.⁴² Rafiq, in his writing, focused mainly on SAARC members' incapabilities of grasping the benefits from its geostrategic location and indulging in sub-regional grouping.⁴³ Moreover, the organisation's inability to effectively address transnational challenges, such as terrorism, poverty, and natural disasters, has raised questions about its relevance and efficacy.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, a significant number of scholars contributed to addressing potential areas for SAARC to restart its activities. Shrestha, Bokhtiar, Kheyal, and Thapa⁴⁵ dedicated their writings to underscoring the scope of new agricultural policies and frameworks in South Asia. Pandey⁴⁶ explored the opportunities in the value chain of spices and other goods. Mishra⁴⁷ illustrates how South Asian states can achieve gross national happiness. Some suggested a greater SAARC that is capable of cooperating to stop the menace of climate change, creating smart borders to ensure seamless connectivity in the whole region for economic benefits and sharing power, water, goods, and services.⁴⁸

As previously discussed, SAFTA—established in 2004—is one of the significant achievements of SAARC, aiming to promote intra-regional trade and economic integration. Additionally, SAARC has facilitated cooperation in various sectors, including agriculture, health, education, and culture, through the establishment of specialised centres and mechanisms.⁴⁹ Furthermore, SAARC has

⁴² N K Mishra, "Gross SAARC Happiness: A Perspective on Ethical Governance," *Asian Review of Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2019): 86–92.

⁴³ Gulshan Rafiq, "Revitalizing SAARC: Challenges and Prospects," *Journal of South Asian Analysis* 4 (2018), <https://thesvi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Gulshan-Rafiq.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Majid, "SAARC prospects and challenges".

⁴⁵ R B Shrestha, S M Bokhtiar, R Khetarpal and Y B Thapa, eds., *Agricultural Policy and Program Framework: Priority Areas for Research & Development* (Dhaka and Bangkok: SAARC Agriculture Centre and Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), 2019).

⁴⁶ Pandey P R and Pandey, I R, eds., *Challenges and Opportunities in Value Chain of Spices in South Asia* (Dhaka: SAARC Agriculture Centre, 2017), 200. <https://www.sac.org.bd/archives/publications/Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20of%20Value%20chain%20of%20Spices%20in%20South%20Asia.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Mishra, "Gross SAARC Happiness".

⁴⁸ Muhammad Saifdar Hussain and Kashif Ijaz, "Assessing the Efficacy of SAARC in Fostering Socio-economic Integration Across South Asian Nations," *Pakistan Research Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2024).

⁴⁹ Santosh C Saha, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Social Development in South Asia: A Study of Some Successful Experiences," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2005): 1–44.

served as a platform for dialogue and collaboration among member states, providing opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagements on issues of mutual concern. The SAARC Summits, held biennially, have provided leaders with a forum to discuss regional challenges, exchange ideas, and explore avenues for cooperation.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding that, SAARC has faced additional criticism for its slow pace of progress and limited tangible outcomes, raising questions about its relevance and efficacy as a regional organisation. Its inability to effectively address transnational challenges, such as terrorism, poverty, and natural disasters, has underscored the need for institutional reforms and revitalisation efforts. For example, the analysis of Das,⁵¹ Gilani and Talib,⁵² Mahaseth, Harsh, and Pandey,⁵³ negating the challenges, established hope for the revival of SAARC. The core ideas of these scholars revolve around the growing importance of the region. This importance has caused changes in the policies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other South Asian states, making them build multilateral cooperation. Madhur⁵⁴ recommended ways to revive SAARC, emphasising boosting intra-regional trade, forging stronger monetary ties, and facilitating connection among states by including people-to-people connectivity. Saleem suggested creating political will and building mutual trust among SAARC member states, while Rajan initiated forming a regional security bloc to end insurgency, terrorism, and other security threats.⁵⁵

2.2 Is SAARC Withering? How to Revive It in the Present Context?

It has been more than three decades since SAARC came into existence. While assessing its success, three sets of actors are usually considered: governments, markets, and people. From this quest, the progress in all three sectors is not satisfactory, as opined by many experts.⁵⁶ This has prompted the question: is SAARC withering? The answer is recurrently searched by scholars as to how SAARC can be

⁵⁰ Sobhan, “The Twelfth SAARC Summit”.

⁵¹ Angana Das, “India’s Neighbourhood Policy: Challenges and Prospects,” *Jindal Journal of International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (October 2016): 18–37.

⁵² Aminah Gilani and Aliya Talib, “Kartarpur corridor: A step towards regional cooperation in South Asia,” *The Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences* 28, no. 2 (2020): 61–76.

⁵³ Harsh Mahaseth and Saumya Pandey, “COVID-19 battle revitalized SAARC in 2020; momentum should not be lost,” *South Asia Monitor*, December 31, 2020, <https://southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/covid-19-battle-revitalized-saarc-2020-momentum-should-not-be-lost>.

⁵⁴ Madhur, “SAARC – Time to Change”.

⁵⁵ Ahmed Saleem, “Towards Expanded Regional Cooperation. Policy Perspectives,” *Policy Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (2012): 15–20.

⁵⁶ Paras Kharel, “Whither SAARC?” in *South Asian Cooperation: Issues Old and New*, ed. Paras Kharel (Kathmandu: South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment, 2018), 20–36.

made more effective and functional. Nonetheless, different scholars shared their perspectives and insights in different ways. Madhur,⁵⁷ for example, sheds light on a crucial factor that summits of SAARC are not taking place, and in comparison, to other regional organisations in Europe and Southeast Asia, SAARC has shown lower momentum and growth rate. He opined that as a regional entity, SAARC is not dead yet. Compared to the successes of other regional organisations such as the EU, ASEAN, and so on, SAARC seems to be inactive, but in reality, ongoing projects are happening under SAARC. Ali et al.,⁵⁸ in a report published by the SAARC Agriculture Centre, explained how South Asian states were working to increase the participation of women in agriculture because without empowering them, there is no way to achieve development. Vaidyanath and Bhardwaj⁵⁹ complemented SAARC's efforts in being instrumental in developing mechanisms, action plans, and legal frameworks for the region, which allowed member states to reduce the loss caused by disasters. Accepting the fact that there is a need for more concerted effort and unity if SAARC states want to implement the existing regional disaster laws and projects more effectively. The authors further focused on the successes of SAARC, such as the implementation of the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND) in 2016 and the creation of the SAARC Food Bank, which still allows member states to access food grains in emergencies. Besides, the establishment of the South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network (SADKN), cross-fertilisation in environmental law, the Severe Thunderstorm Observations and Regional Modelling (STORM) programme to increase prediction and warning of severe storms in the region, and finally, the creation of COVID-19 relief fund.

Prasad and Chakravarty,⁶⁰ on the other hand, assessed the sustainable development goals implementation in SAARC countries illustrating how India excelled in poverty reduction and job creation; Bangladesh made progress in granting

⁵⁷ Madhur, "SAARC – Time to Change".

⁵⁸ Dr Md Younus Ali, Dr Rudra Bahadur Shrestha, Dr S M Bokhtiar, and Ms Fatema Nasrin Jahan, eds., *Youth and Women in Agriculture: Economic Development and Food Security in South Asia* (Dhaka: SAARC Agriculture Centre, 2019) https://www.academia.edu/44046826/Youth_and_Women_Engagement_for_Agricultural_Development_in_South_Asia.

⁵⁹ Priyanka Vaidyanath and Chhaya Bhardwaj, "SAARC Regional Disaster Law: Need for Progressive Development," *Yearbook of International Disaster Law Online* 4, no. 1 (2023): 123–151 https://brill.com/view/journals/yido/4/1/article-p123_7.xml.

⁶⁰ Umesh Prasad and Soumitro Chakravarty, "Assessing the Progress of SDG Implementation in SAARC Countries: A Comparative Analysis," in *Sustainable Development Goals in SAARC Countries: Key Issues, Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Santosh Pandurang Mane (Pune: Jyotikiron Publication, 2023), 59–62.

quality education; Maldives succeeded in creating gender parity in primary and secondary education; and Bhutan provided access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities. However, Afghanistan and Pakistan face poverty and sanitation issues, whereas every other state has persistent challenges in achieving other goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By explaining this, the authors show a light of hope that if SAARC countries are willing to work together in achieving the SDGs, they can help each other to grow in their respective fields of expertise. In the same line of argument, Manzoor et al.⁶¹ underscore that by working on the growth of small and medium industries (SMEs), openness of trade and social sector development, SAARC members can alleviate poverty in the region. The authors are very hopeful about SAARC countries' participation in these sectors. Adding to this, as Rafiq⁶² states that SAARC explored numerous areas of cooperation in distinct fields like "agriculture and rural development; science and technology; meteorology; transport; telecommunications; biotechnology; environment and forestry; tourism; energy; women, youth and children; health and population; education, arts, culture, and sports; and intellectual property rights, etc." This reflects the fact that even without the summit taking place, the activities of SAARC have not completely stopped. There is no denying that SAARC's activities are not as fruitful and advantageous. The reason is very simple: regular summits are not taking place, and SAARC heads of state are not sitting together. If only members were willing to work to create free trade areas and follow the paths of ASEAN, EU, and others, SAARC would have been more functional. This is why a former official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Bangladesh, remarked:

*"SAARC is in a coma; alive, but only some of the organs are working. Hence, we need to give it what is necessary for it to survive."*⁶³

2.3 The Initial Defunct Organisations: Some Examples

In discussing functional organisations, some regional organisations which are now successful, such as the ASEAN and the African Union (AU), faced a time of

⁶¹ Faiza Manzoor et al., "Role of SME in Poverty Alleviation in SAARC Region via Panel Data Analysis," *Sustainability* 11, no. 22 (2019): 6480, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11226480>.

⁶² Rafiq, "Revitalizing SAARC".

⁶³ Former Additional Secretary, MoFA (BIMSTEC and SAARC), interview taken on May 08, 2024 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

stagnancy at the initial stage. Although some of their organs were working, they faced challenges and were later revived and finally became active again. Fagbayibo mentioned the case study of the Organization of the African Unity (OAU),⁶⁴ founded in 1963, but due to a lack of resources and corruption leading to poor policy advice, weak infrastructure, and underdevelopment, the socio-economic development of the OAU was completely hampered. Hence, to rebuild supranational governance from a democratic lens, establishing a more effective platform for development, especially in the socio-economic sector, peace, and security, the OAU was transformed into the AU in 2000 with a new set of rules and systems. Whereas the Charter of the OAU had no authority over the member states, the AU established an institutional architecture and objectives. The OAU failed to achieve regional integration, but the AU did. Unlike the OAU, the AU created institutions such as the Pan-African Parliament, the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, the Peace and Security Council, the AU Commission, and others. The AU even came up with new rules, like intervening in conflictual zones and overviewing the maintenance of the protocols. In short, there are similarities between the institutional architectures of the AU and EU, which were absent in the OAU. Hence, by building new norms, rules and systems, additionally, bringing more points of commonality for the members to cooperate, the AU revived itself from the failures of the OAU.

About ASEAN, Lee⁶⁵ elucidated the history of this regional organisation, noting that upon its formation in 1967, most of the signatory states were facing domestic insurgencies. During this period, it did not have the power to intervene in the internal affairs of the state or even exert pressure on member countries. Due to an ill-defined consensus approach, interstate rivalries and external influence were dominant. These, once upon a time, hampered the growth of ASEAN. Primarily, the Soviet, Chinese, and the dominance and interference of the USA were visible. Lee further elaborated that it was believed that the end of the Cold War and the lost interest of the USA would result in the demise of the ASEAN. However, proving everyone wrong, ASEAN as a regional institution was revived in the mid-1990s. The rise of China and its activities in the South China Sea spurred ASEAN's revival. The members collectively projected their military power against China in the South China Sea. Since then, members gradually resolved their existing internal disputes and then focused more on countering external threats to their region along with advancing shared economic benefits. Now, ASEAN, which initially saw stagnancy, is one of the

⁶⁴ Babatunde Fagbayibo, "From OAU to AU: Rethinking Supranational Governance in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Politics, Governance and Development*, ed. Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 771–782.

⁶⁵ As mentioned in J Lee, "China's ASEAN Invasion," *The National Interest*, May 01, 2007.

successful examples of regional integration after the EU. In addition, there are other contemporary examples such as after the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the remaining members went ahead and formed a new version of the pact named, the Comprehensive and Progress Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) adding China as a member and new factors such as stronger labour and environmental provisions. Hence, these examples demonstrate that even though SAARC is not that active at summit level, there remains potential for its revival as a regional institution at the operational level.

2.4 Research Gaps: Where are the Scopes of Contribution?

Despite the substantial body of academic writings on SAARC and its revival, the research gap remains in delineating a clear and actionable path for SAARC to renew its functions and effectively encounter its multifarious challenges. Existing literature frequently falls short in identifying and elaborating on the specific potential areas where member countries can collaborate to surmount socio-economic, cultural, and other pertinent regional challenges. This oversight leaves a critical void in understanding how SAARC can harness its full potential for the collective benefit of South Asian nations.

Furthermore, while there exists an extensive corpus of literature examining causes and challenges contributing to SAARC's current state, there is a noticeable deficiency in studying comprehensive and effective proposals for SAARC's revival. Most existing research tends to focus on isolated factors such as political discord, institutional weaknesses, and operational shortcomings that have historically impeded SAARC's efficacy. However, these studies often fall short of synthesising these elements into a cohesive strategy that can guide practical revitalisation efforts. A review of existing research shows that while many scholars discuss SAARC's structural issues, like the need for unanimous decisions and bureaucratic delays, few studies go beyond identifying problems to suggest strong solutions. Proposed solutions are typically fragmented and lack the integrative perspective needed to address the interconnected nature of SAARC's challenges. For instance, recommendations for institutional reforms or diplomatic strategies often do not account for the broader socio-political and economic context in which these reforms must be implemented, nor do they provide a detailed roadmap for how such reforms could be realistically achieved.

It is also revealed that the existing literature frequently neglects the potential for cooperation in emerging areas of mutual interest that could serve as catalysts for SAARC's revitalisation. There is limited discussion on how member states can leverage contemporary global and regional developments, such as digital

transformation, sustainable development, and climate resilience, to foster deeper integration and collaboration. This gap suggests a need for research that not only highlights the new areas of potential cooperation but also provides detailed strategies for their exploration and implementation. In addition, while numerous studies have investigated the political, institutional, and operational factors contributing to SAARC's decline, there remains a dearth of comprehensive frameworks that integrate theoretical perspectives with practical strategies for revitalisation. This is significant because a purely theoretical or descriptive approach does not suffice in addressing the practical realities and complexities faced by SAARC. What is needed is a nuanced, multi-dimensional framework that incorporates both the theoretical insights and practical considerations necessary for effective implementation.

As such, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding the development of an effective conceptual framework for SAARC's revival. A well-developed framework will serve as a crucial tool in bridging the gap between theoretical analysis and practical application, providing a detailed and systematic approach to overcoming the multifaceted challenges faced by SAARC. This framework would integrate theoretical insights from various disciplines, such as political science, international relations, and economics, with empirical evidence gathered from historical experiences and current realities of regional cooperation efforts. This framework would encompass practical considerations that address the operational and institutional dynamics specific to SAARC. It will also provide policymakers with actionable strategies and clear guidelines for implementing reforms, enhancing institutional capacities, and fostering greater collaboration among member states. Such a framework will not only highlight the structural and procedural changes needed within SAARC but also emphasise the importance of political will and diplomatic engagement in driving the organisation's revival. It should be added that a comprehensive framework will serve as a valuable resource for practitioners working within the SAARC ecosystem, including diplomats, regional planners, and development experts. It will offer a coherent set of principles and best practices for managing regional cooperation projects, facilitating cross-border initiatives, and ensuring that collaborative efforts are aligned with the broader goals of regional integration and development. For scholars, this framework will provide a robust analytical tool for further research on regional cooperation in South Asia. It will also open new avenues for academic inquiry by identifying key areas of potential cooperation, proposing innovative solutions to longstanding challenges, and offering a deeper understanding of the dynamics that influence regional organisations' effectiveness. By synthesising existing knowledge and presenting a unified approach,

the framework will contribute significantly to the academic discourse on SAARC and regional integration.

Therefore, this study aims to fill these critical gaps in the existing research by discovering and articulating the full potential of SAARC. It seeks to identify all relevant areas for revival, providing a detailed and systematic approach to overcoming the challenges that have historically hampered SAARC's effectiveness. By doing so, the paper will contribute a comprehensive and actionable framework for SAARC's renewal, integrating insights from political science, economics, and regional studies to offer a holistic strategy for revitalisation.

Chapter 3

Analytical Framework and Methodology

The chapter briefly highlights the analytical model and methodological approach employed in this study. The chapter posits that many theories within the discipline of IR offer insights into SAARC and probable avenues of regional integration. The chapter delineates that reliance on a singular theory of IR is not enough to elucidate the complexities of SAARC resurgence. Rather, the chapter contends that a multidisciplinary approach combining various social science theories can work better by encompassing various new aspects, including mission, vision, and values, and through a comprehensive understanding. In particular, the frameworks proposed by Kotter and McKinsey are deemed pertinent in explaining SAARC's revival prospects. By synthesising these models, the chapter offers a nuanced SAARC revival model, taking into account the existing challenges and identifying probable areas of cooperation. This operational framework is crafted for this study in order to consider multidimensional issues that characterise SAARC's operational landscape. Subsequently, the chapter offers methodological approaches to guide the study. Within this section, meticulous attention is given to explaining the methodological tools, research design, and data collection methods. By explaining a detailed account of the methodological underpinnings, the chapter delineates the rigour and validity while explaining the data analysis.

3.1 Explaining SAARC with the Theories of IR

There are several theories of IR which explain SAARC and regional cooperation. Theories of IR, by and large, help to make sense of the contemporary world by analysing the behaviours of the actors and their activities. Realism, for instance, helps in clarifying the challenges SAARC faces. The emphasis on realism on national interest, power politics, and the dominant role of the state reveals why SAARC is still struggling to achieve deeper integration. The persistent rivalry among South Asian states and their competition for power is complicating the efforts to strengthen the organisation. The activities of SAARC can be reviewed differently through different types of realism. For instance, classical realism, which is rooted in the ideas of thinkers like Thucydides and Hans J Morgenthau, views states as power-seeking entities.⁶⁶ Thus, SAARC's effectiveness, from this perspective, is limited because member states prioritise their national interests and power over regional

⁶⁶ Ole R Holsti, "Theories of International Relations," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, eds. Michael J Hogan and Thomas G Paterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51–90.

cooperation. Additionally, the rivalry between India and Pakistan demonstrates the classical realist perspective of how conflict and competition are natural in international relations. This rivalry can also be explained from structural realism articulated by Kenneth Waltz, who believed states prioritise their security due to the dilemma and mistrust.⁶⁷ In addition, smaller states in South Asia quite often align with India to balance regional power dynamics, which further affects SAARC's unity and effectiveness. Mostly, issues such as power imbalances, regional rivalries, and policy rifts keep the smaller states in a hard position to secure their interests.⁶⁸ Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive realism" offers valuable insight into grasping the geo-political dynamics of South Asia as well as the functioning of regional organisations like SAARC.⁶⁹ Although this theory does not directly relate to SAARC and predominantly focuses on great power competition among the major powers (e.g., the USA, China, and Russia), some of its core principles (e.g., power maximisation, security competition, and balancing behaviour) can be applied in South Asian countries *vis-à-vis* SAARC. For example, it detects that SAARC might become a platform for a dominant state like India to assert its influence over smaller states as states incline towards power maximisation. In the region, India and Pakistan are constantly in power competition, which has spillover ramifications, and also these distrustful and competitive nature of relationships that Mearsheimer explained as a major hindrance to the effectiveness of SAARC. Then again, the 'defensive neorealism' of Waltz, which is regarded as the core of offensive realism, brings out some fundamental viewpoints that states are not inherently aggressive and expansionist; rather, they are rational actors. Therefore, instead of power accumulation and seeking hegemony, SAARC countries can work together to promote stability and reduce conflictual situations through dialogue and cooperation. However, integration, in practice, might remain elusive.

Contrary to realism, liberalism and constructivism explain the potential of SAARC as a regional organisation. By emphasising cooperation and interdependence, Liberalism analyses how SAARC can help solve the conflicts among states. Classical liberalists argue that when states become economically interdependent, the chance of

⁶⁷ Holsti, "Theories of International Relations".

⁶⁸ Thazha V Paul, "When balance of power meets globalization: China, India and the small states of South Asia," *Politics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 50–63.

⁶⁹ Zhenshuo Hu, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy from the Perspective of Offensive Realism," *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2022): 36–41.

future conflict decreases along with existing ones.⁷⁰ Hence, by promoting trade and economic cooperation, SAARC can foster peace and stability in South Asia. Additionally, the focus on state-level cooperation of SAARC aligns with classical liberalist principles of promoting human rights and social development. Neo-liberal institutionalists like Robert Keohane emphasises international institutions to facilitate cooperation and highlight how SAARC as a platform can help reduce transaction costs, provide mechanisms for dispute resolution, and enhance cooperation even among states with historical rivalries.⁷¹ Finally, liberal institutionalism also advocates for a global governance and rule-based international order, which SAARC can easily support by achieving sustainable goals.⁷²

From the perspective of constructivists, the members of SAARC are capable of constructing a regional identity which will help them share norms of cooperation and peace. If a South Asian identity is achieved, SAARC's mission will soon be accomplished. Constructivists believe this identity formation can happen under a regional organisation.⁷³ Hence, through SAARC, the member states can develop a sense of belonging to a South Asian community, which can foster cooperation and reduce conflicts. In addition, South Asian countries already share historical bonds. Constructivists then believe in the process of socialisation, where states learn from each other and adopt shared norms and practices.⁷⁴ It brings out the possibility of how SAARC can provide a forum for repeated interactions and can lead to the internalisation of cooperative norms and practices among member states. However, there remain challenges since the identities and interests of the members are diverse and the common history is also of animosity and tensions. Hence, despite the potential for identity formation, a common vision and mission are still not achieved, hindering the realisation of SAARC's common goals.

From above discussions, it can be argued that theories of IR as a whole assist significantly in understanding the patterns and dynamics of regional mechanisms like SAARC, shedding light on why regional integration takes place, what challenges an

⁷⁰ Andrew Moravcsik, *Liberal Theories of International Relations: A Primer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2010).

⁷¹ Robert O Keohane, "International institutions: Two approaches," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): 379-396.

⁷² Moravcsik, "Liberal theories of international".

⁷³ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, "Constructivism," in *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, ed. Nicholas Greenwood Onuf (London: Routledge, 2012), 35-65.

⁷⁴ Onuf, "Constructivism".

organisation might face, and the potential that they can offer. However, whenever the discourse of regional integration is discussed, neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism are typically regarded as the two most predominant theories in explaining the integration process.⁷⁵

3.1.1 *SAARC and Theories of Regional Integration*

Neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism interpret regional integration and cooperation in different ways. However, in the case of SAARC, both theories help explain why SAARC has seen limited success in achieving regional integration and faces ongoing challenges due to political conflicts and institutional weakness.

Neo-functionalists, as proposed by Ernst B Haas, believe that the regional integration process is driven by the functional needs of states. The cooperation initially starts in one particular area, such as the economy, and then spills over across other sectors, including political, cultural, and others. This theory mainly focuses on the role of supranational institutions and non-state actors in further integration. This theory also helps understand the integration process of the EU.⁷⁶ However, from a neo-functionalism perspective, the activities of SAARC are not up to the mark. Even though SAARC was founded to promote economic, social, and cultural cooperation among South Asian nations and built a Secretariat as well, the effectiveness of this regional organisation became limited.

From a neo-functionalism view, SAARC's weak institutional framework prevented the spillover of cooperation into more important and sensitive areas like politics and security. As they predict that stronger regional institutions are needed for deeper integration, SAARC lacks in providing that strong institutional framework. In addition, absence of strong supranational institutions where the power structure could have gone beyond the state to the supranational authority and where collective good could have been achieved has hindered integration in politically sensitive areas like border conflicts, terrorism, and military cooperation. Most importantly, bilateral conflicts, especially between India and Pakistan, prevent the deepening of regional integration. As the structure of SAARC does not cooperate in core sectors like

⁷⁵ Frank Schimmelfennig, "Regional Integration Theory," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, February 26, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.599>.

⁷⁶ Philippe C Schmitter, "Ernst B. Haas and the Legacy of Neofunctionalism," *Journal of European Public Policy* 12, no. 2 (2005): 255–272, doi:10.1080/13501760500043951.

security as neo-functionalists prefer, the benefits of economic or social cooperation have not fully spilt over to other areas yet.

Now, the theory of intergovernmentalism views integration as a process where member states agree to cooperate but without employing full control over the process. The transfer of power to supranational institutions is minimal, and states negotiate and cooperate based on national interests.⁷⁷ The existing principles and the way SAARC functions can be described through the lens of intergovernmentalism. This concept of state-driven cooperation, as discussed by intergovernmentalism, emphasises state sovereignty and determines what individual member states are willing to agree upon without ceding authority to any regional body. This principle is also reflected in the functioning of SAARC, where decisions are made based on the principle of unanimity and consensus. Additionally, SAARC focuses on issues like health, education, environment, agriculture, and others that are not controversial and where member states can reach a consensus. Thus, intergovernmentalism is explained as a strategy for states to prioritise their national interests. This approach allows countries to only cooperate on certain issues that do not jeopardise their sovereignty.

However, activities of SAARC can still be criticised from the intergovernmentalism view. Under intergovernmentalism, conflicts such as the India-Pakistan rivalry hinder effective cooperation. Major states prioritise their security concerns and political interests, which, even when focusing on non-contentious issues, is limiting SAARC's potential for deeper integration. In addition, SAARC lacks a supranational authority, which is even required for the minimal cooperation that intergovernmentalism preaches. The absence of a supranational institution is preventing SAARC from evolving into a more integrated regional organisation.

In brief, neo-functionalism highlights the lack of spill-over effects and institutional development in the regional integration process of SAARC. As per this notion, the member states are not willing to create a supranational institution and hand over power to them. In contrast, the key focus of intergovernmentalism is to explain the role of states and national interests and identify the areas where states are willing to cooperate. However, political conflicts, lack of consensus, and the unwillingness of member states to cooperate in terms of minimal power transfer are major reasons why SAARC has remained largely inactive so far.

⁷⁷ Michelle Cini, *European Union Politics (3rd edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3.2 Why Theories of IR Cannot Provide a Comprehensive Overview of SAARC Revival?

Despite arriving from different ideologies and scholars of IR, all theories have one thing in common, and that is that theories explain but do not adequately predict how an individual or state would act in complex situations. Rather, with the help of the theories, scholars explain the reasons behind conflicts or policies. For instance, when the United Kingdom (UK) exited the EU, theories helped understand the reason behind the sentiment of the UK of how the country wanted to build relations with other states and also maintain immigration issues. However, no such theory outlined a definite path for the UK's re-join into the EU.

Even from the lens of International Political Economy (IPE), the theory of Béla Alexander Balassa, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and a consultant of the World Bank, tried to provide a framework for building regional cooperation from the economic point of view (Figure 3.1). Bela Balassa, in his book “Theory of Economic Integration (1962)”⁷⁸, using the case study of the EU, explained that this is the only regional cooperation that is fully integrated with the member states. The journey of the EU started with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1950 and after that, the community developed into an Economic Cooperation in 1957.

⁷⁸ André Sapir, “European Integration at the Crossroads: A Review Essay on the 50th Anniversary of Bela Balassa’s Theory of Economic Integration,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 49, no. 4 (2011): 1200–1229.

Figure 3.1: Levels of Regional Integration⁷⁹

Level of Integration	Free Trade Area	Customs Union	Common Market	Economic and (sometimes) Monetary Union	Political Union
Members agree to eliminate tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers with each other but maintain their own trade barriers with non-member countries. Examples: NAFTA, EFTA, ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand Closer Economic Relations Agreement (CER)					
Common external tariffs Example: MERCOSUR					
Free movement of products, labor, and capital Example: Pre-1992 European Economic Community					
Unified monetary and fiscal policy by a central authority Example: The European Union today exhibits common trade, agricultural, and monetary policies					
Perfect unification of all policies by a common organization; subversion of all separate national institutions Example: Remains an ideal; yet to be achieved					

From cooperation to becoming a fully integrated regional organisation in 1993, the EU completed the full cycle of the stages mentioned by Bela Balassa. However, when the 2008 economic crisis occurred, and later, Brexit took place, the theoretical explanation provided by Balassa did not outline how to overcome those failures. Hence, it can be comprehended that this theory appears inefficient and is applicable only to build regional integration, not to revive or solve existing problems. This is why, even though the EU is regarded as a successful model of regional integration, this theoretical assumption cannot be implied in the case of SAARC.

Apart from this, SAARC is indeed a pioneering regional organisation for South Asian countries, but faces stagnation in its crucial activities. While it made some progress in functional cooperation and trade liberalisation, the ongoing political conflicts and economic disparities among member states continue to hinder deeper integration. Achieving the higher stages of integration, as outlined by Balassa, will require addressing these fundamental challenges. Hence, to advance its integration process, SAARC requires an analytical model/framework that will facilitate the member states to create a common ground and promote collaborative development.

Thus, it is argued in this section that theories are meant to assist in understanding the patterns and dynamics of regional mechanisms but are not designed to provide a prescriptive solution for the revival of any organisation like SAARC. The

⁷⁹ Based on Bela Balassa, *The Theory of Economic Integration* (Oxford, UK: Routledge Revivals, 2012).

revitalisation process of SAARC needs a holistic approach which will not only address historical, political, and cultural factors but also recommend ways to achieve mutual benefits from economic and other aspects. The revitalisation method also needs to include the unique challenges faced by SAARC and how to overcome those key concerns. Finally, unlike theories, the process of revitalising SAARC cannot be based on systematic factors only, but also the roles of leaders, stakeholders, people, external actors, and others are pertinent. Otherwise, the path of making SAARC work again for the mutual benefit of South Asian states will be an arduous task. In brief, theories provide insights, but revitalisation demands a nuanced and context-specific approach beyond theoretical frameworks.

3.3 Revival of SAARC: Offering an Analytical Framework

This study, realising inefficiency to find the answer in theories of IR and IPE, adopts, renders and merges two sociological theories of organisation: Kotter's 8-step change management model with McKinsey's 7-S framework in the context of SAARC. The study has taken help from these two organisational models because, first, SAARC needs a revival model that will address every sector, such as culture, economy, environment, and so on, to ensure development for every member state. Second, SAARC needs changes in some of the sectors since, without addressing the bilateral issues and conflicts, it is difficult to bring the member states together. Hence, this study, by integrating the elements from both of these organisational models, proposes a pathway which will help SAARC from every aspect. Integration of the parameters of these two models is an initial step for creating urgency among states since they need to feel the urge to come together and then move forward with working together for the revival of SAARC. The two theories that have been used to formulate the framework will be discussed in the following sections to better facilitate the understanding of how the discussion progressed to the framework itself. This will then clarify how the developed framework seeks to explain SAARC's revival in a more constructive way that better encapsulates the organisation's mandate and objectives through a step-by-step development process.

3.3.1 *Kotter's Theory*

Dr John Kotter, the founder of Kotter International, provided a path for organisations to overcome barriers.⁸⁰ Kotter initially introduced his model to highlight the importance of institutional change to acquire improvement in international relations and help the leaders execute the necessary change needed in their respective fields. It is a guiding approach for an organisation to acquire the desired goals in the international arena. Kotter's 8 steps consisted of:

- establishing a need for urgency to address the problems that have stopped the development;
- creating a committee of the stakeholders who are affected by the halt of the development;
- making a vision that would benefit all the parties involved in the coalition;
- arranging conferences and meetings by communicating with the members so they feel that their opinions are valued;
- removing existing barriers and empowering others to implement the vision;
- planning the implementation process for long and short-term wins;
- strengthening the implementation process; and,
- institutionalising the new approaches to support the infrastructure of new changes.⁸¹

Even though Kotter's model illustrates the sequential steps to make an organisation work, the scope of his study confronts two notable limitations. First, the proposed model of Kotter was explained from a corporate context, and later, it was used in human services and educational organisations. Second, the covered aspect of the model is predominantly economic. However, SAARC and its activities are not only confined to economic cooperation but also embrace a multifaceted realm of collaboration related to culture, peace and security, and other issues.

3.3.2 *McKinsey's Theory*

In the 1980s, Tom Peters, Robert Waterman, and Julien Philips, consultants of McKinsey, developed the 7-S Framework as a planning tool for academics and practitioners to outline the ways to achieve organisational effectiveness. This can help to understand SAARC by providing some valuable insights. McKinsey's 7-S Framework covers the limitation of Kotter's model by incorporating non-financial

⁸⁰ Mary Haas et al., “Didactics Revolution: Applying Kotter’s 8-Step Change Management Model to Residency Didactics,” *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine* 21, no. 1 (2019): 65–70.

⁸¹ Haas et al., “Didactics Revolution”.

aspects from an organisational performance perspective. The McKinsey 7-S Framework identifies seven interrelated elements that influence organisational effectiveness: Strategy, Structure, Systems, Shared Values, Skills, Style, and Staff. While explaining McKinsey's model, M Bileski defines performance as "the essence of an organisation and it is determined by the achievements and outcomes".⁸²

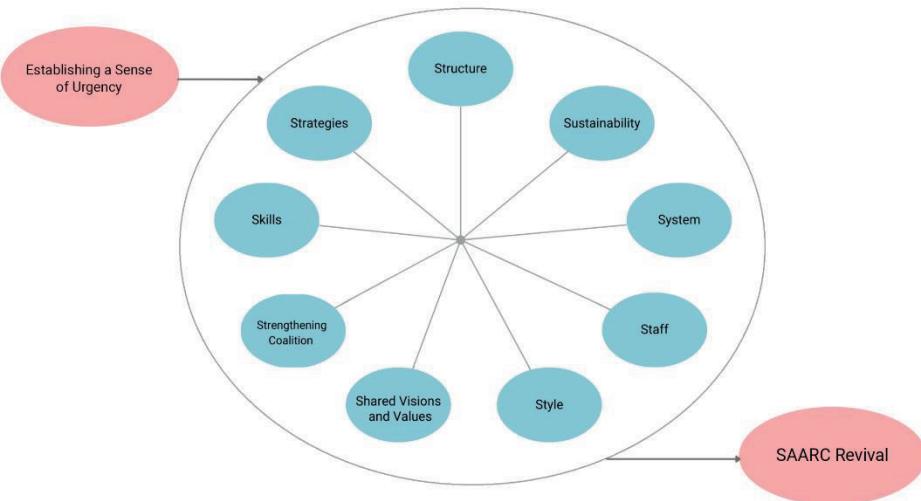
Therefore, if the organisation wants to reach its full potential, the seven factors mentioned in the model need to be achieved. The model further pinned down strategy, structure, and system as technical elements, whereas the other four are regarded as social factors. The scholars of this model believe that technical elements have a limited effect on the performance of an organisation; that is why effective functioning requires the incorporation of social factors. Although McKinsey's model fills the gap of Kotter's model, the framework is unable to encompass all the factors that a regional organisation needs to revive. In addition, unlike Kotter's model, the aspects of creating a vision and the role of the actors are missing.⁸³

Taking into account the challenges and the prospective avenues for SAARC revitalisation, the study advocates and frames the 10-S revival model for SAARC by synthesising the salient features of these two above-discussed models (Figure 3.2). The study also includes additional factors appropriate for the institution. The diagram delineating the proposed framework is as follows:

⁸² Małgorzata Chmielewska et al., "Evaluating organizational performance of public hospitals using the McKinsey 7-S framework," *BMC Health Services Research* 22 (2022): 1–12.

⁸³ Chmielewska et al., "Evaluating organizational performance".

Figure 3.2: 10-S Revival Model of SAARC⁸⁴ Through Organisational Approach⁸⁵



The rationale underpinning the consideration of the applicability of this model lies in its comprehensive coverage of every component which is needed to make SAARC functional. The core components of the 10-S revival model of SAARC are as follows:

Sense of Urgency: From the context of SAARC, a “sense of urgency” refers to the immediate action and collective need for South Asian states to address rising security threats and geopolitical challenges, recognising that these issues equally impact the stability and prosperity of the entire region. The urgency is crucial for fostering regional cooperation to counteract external influences and tackle non-traditional security risks effectively. Also, in contemporary times, the global landscape is continuously evolving. With the recent shift towards the Indian Ocean region driven by the great power rivalry between India, China, and the USA, the South Asian region is gaining greater importance as an economic and strategic hub. According to Kaplan, “Because of the intensification, the region will become a focal point for global conflict of trade through its routes, but more importantly, because the

⁸⁴ Rendered by the authors based on the theories of McKinsey and Kotter, 2004.

⁸⁵ Made by the authors.

major players' interests in this area intersect and overlap".⁸⁶ Hence, to balance the influence of external actors in South Asia, creating regional cooperation will serve the interests of India.⁸⁷ In addition, non-traditional security threats like environmental degradation, terrorism, and human trafficking also require collective attention from the South Asian states. As evidenced by the Regional Co-operation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) study, it becomes apparent that in comparison to Bangladesh, other Asian states face more vulnerabilities such as armed robbery, piracy, smuggling and so forth.⁸⁸ Hence, this is the opportunity to create a sense of urgency among the South Asian states by helping them realise how the threats are equally dangerous for them. This will help them to find diplomatic channels and public diplomacy for renewed cooperation.

Shared Updated Vision and Values: The “shared value and vision” is defined as the collective commitment of South Asian states to foster cooperation and mutual benefits, transcending nationalistic interests to address common regional challenges and opportunities. The developments in the South Asian region have brought hope that a shared updated vision can be created. First, on 09 November 2019, the Kartarpur Corridor was built, allowing visa-free travel from India to Pakistan. In this aspect, the UN Secretary General António Guterres called Kartarpur a “Corridor of Hope”⁸⁹ because, in the presence of conflicts in Kashmir, both India and Pakistan are trying to build good relations. Pakistan has even formed a Gandharva Research Institute Centre to promote religious tourism.⁹⁰

Second, Narendra Modi, at the general debate of the 69th session of the UN General Assembly, stated, “A nation’s destiny is linked to its neighbourhood. That is why my government has placed the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with her neighbours”⁹¹ explaining why they have taken a “neighbourhood first policy”. This willingness from India showcases a doorway to SAARC’s revival. Finally, COVID-19 created a narrative of how a region needs to combat a crisis

⁸⁶ Seth Kaplan, “Identifying truly fragile states,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2014): 49–63.

⁸⁷ Herkan Neadan Toppo, “India’s interests in emerging subregional cooperation: Opportunities and challenges,” *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2016): 33–64.

⁸⁸ Miha Hribernik, “Countering maritime piracy and robbery in Southeast Asia: The role of the ReCAAP Agreement,” *EIAS Briefing Paper* 2013/2 (2013).

⁸⁹ Muhammad Saif Ullah, Ghulam Sarwar and Umar Daraz, “Kartarpur Corridor: Re-defining Security in South Asian Region,” *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2022): 01–09.

⁹⁰ “KP Govt to set up Gandhara Research Center for promotion of religious tourism,” *ARY News*, last modified December 09, 2019, <https://arynews.tv/gandhara-research-center/>.

⁹¹ Das, “India’s Neighbourhood Policy”; Mahaseth and Pandey, “COVID-19 Battle Revitalized”.

together. In addition, since the inception of SAARC, the member state's nationalistic outlook has prevailed over the international outlook, resulting in the crisis among South Asian states. As there is scope for updating the vision in the present context and states are also moving towards multilateral cooperation, SAARC can be revived by creating a shared perspective that would bring benefit for all.⁹²

Structure: In the context of SAARC, 'structure' is defined as the organisational framework that shapes its principles and operations, particularly its approach to handling bilateral conflicts between member states. Each regional organisation has a distinct set of principles and a definite structure. For example, the main structural difference between the EU and SAARC is the bilateral predicaments. The EU has always taken a stern stance whenever its member states get involved in conflict with each other or non-member states. In the Piran Bay conflict, for example, the EU made sure that Croatia and Slovenia resolved their differences. When ethnic fights were going on between Turkey and Cyprus, the EU was involved in UN-led negotiation efforts.⁹³ Despite belonging to different regions, the EU is not free from conflict among member states like SAARC. However, despite the structural difference, the EU is maintaining trade relations and, at the same time, trying to resolve disputes. That is why the EU is regarded as a successful example of a regional organisation. Following this example, SAARC can bring change to its Article X (2), which stops the members from getting involved in bilateral disputes and helps states resolve their differences in the presence of members of SAARC. In addition, if the political will to keep trade and cooperation intact is present, keeping aside the national outlook can be established, and SAARC will become active again.⁹⁴

Strategies: By and large, 'strategies' for SAARC mean the initiatives aimed at leveraging the potential of South Asian state's ongoing cooperation and establishing a regional security bloc to foster cooperation and deter external influence. To revive SAARC, new initiatives can be directed towards using the potential of the Indian Ocean region and the Bay of Bengal, utilising tourist and heritage potential along with creating a regional security bloc, which was absent in the previous efforts. These strategies will deter outside influence and help the states grow together.

⁹² Rafiq, "Revitalizing SAARC".

⁹³ Osama Sharoon, Dr Bilal Bin Liaqat and Aized Khalil, "Assessing the Obstacles to Regional Integration for Development, Governance and Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the SAARC and the European Union," *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2023): 27–37.

⁹⁴ Osama, Liaqat and Khalil, "Assessing the Obstacles".

Skills: In this region, ‘skills’ refers to the utilisation of human capital as assets and exploring their untapped potential. According to the World Bank Report (2023), the population in South Asia will be 2.3 billion by 2050, which is around 25 per cent of the global population.⁹⁵ With increased civil engagement and the use of human assets, the South Asian states can bring economic development. To attain that, SAARC needs to work on the skills of the workforce like using them as resources by enhancing their capabilities in different sectors such as administration, electrical and plumber jobs, and other skilled trades and this approach will eventually assist them in transforming into skilled labour jobs, thereby, accelerating region’s growth and prosperity. If SAARC is used as a pathway to collectively train and build up a team of experts in diverse fields, it can serve as a strengthening element towards solidifying this organisation’s relevance and position in the region.

Strengthening Coalition: ‘Coalition’ in the context of SAARC refers to the engagement of two or more member countries working together to attain their goals. The gap in SAARC’s previous efforts is that states are more involved in sub-regional coalitions. If the coalitions or deals between three or more states in South Asia can be brought under the umbrella of SAARC, it can pave the path toward shared prosperity.⁹⁶

Shared Prosperity: The term ‘shared prosperity’ means the collective economic growth and development achieved through regional cooperation, mutual support, and the equitable distribution of benefits among the member states. The members can be brought together in South Asia because, in the past, the benefits and prosperity were not equally beneficial for everyone. For example, many spices are grown in the South Asian region, and the estimated growth rate for spices demand in the world is around 3.2 per cent. With the establishment of a value chain of spices in South Asia, exports can be increased. This scenario is the same for agricultural development as well. As predicted by the SAARC Agriculture Centre (SAC), with participation from every state, government, civil society, and business community, technological revolution 4.0 can be achieved in agriculture and allied industries in the South Asian region, resulting in increased exports. This indicates that with free trade and increased connectivity, SAARC members can help each other to flourish.⁹⁷

Style: SAARC needs to have a unique ‘style’, meaning a distinctive approach that integrates Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a development indicator,

⁹⁵ Madhur, “SAARC – Time to Change”.

⁹⁶ K Rajan, “Renewing SAARC,” 2023, <https://alternative-regionalisms.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/rajan.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Shrestha, Bokhtiar, Khetarpal and Thapa, eds., *Agricultural Policy and Program Framework*.

combining economic growth with sustainable development, cultural preservation, and good governance to foster regional harmony. As Elizabeth Allinson proposed, SAARC needs to bring the parameter of Gross National Happiness (GNH), like Bhutan as an indicator of development. Only depending on economic growth and gross domestic product (GDP) is not enough to break the curse of mistrust and conflicts in South Asia. Like Bhutan's model of development, SAARC can change its style of operating by combining sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of culture, and most importantly good governance with the existing economic factor. Cultural richness, innate bonding based on shared values, and a common heritage setting the South Asian states apart from the rest of the world is what makes SAARC capable of ensuring GNH.⁹⁸

Staff: The activities of SAARC were mainly characterised by decisions of leaders. To bring change to SAARC and increase effectiveness, this framework, from SAARC's perspective, encompasses not only high-ranking officials like Prime Ministers and leaders but also includes ministers and ordinary citizens while defining staff. This inclusive approach leverages people-to-people and culture-to-culture interactions, fostering regional growth through a bottom-up strategy. Because of sharing commonality, historical ties, and interactions, SAARC can play a huge role in facilitating people-to-people and culture-to-culture interaction. This means that other than depending on only states as actors, the involvement of common people can facilitate growth in the region much faster.⁹⁹

System: SAARC requires a change in the system to make it functional. From this context, 'system' refers to the organisational and operational framework that underpins its functioning. As the older system of SAARC was insufficient to make it beneficial for all South Asian states, necessitating a new system that incorporates monetary integration, free trade, and other mechanisms is essential for SAARC's revival. For example, the degree of monetary integration system among SAARC states is not up to the mark. Hence, by introducing a regional trade exchange rate, coordination can take place and also help create a closer exchange rate.

Sustainability: 'Sustainability', in the case of SAARC, refers to ensuring that the developments do not take a back step, unlike past agreements. The policies need

⁹⁸ Mishra, "Gross SAARC Happiness".

⁹⁹ Rajan, "Renewing SAARC".

to be directed towards not only short-term but also long-term wins. Only then SAARC will truly be revived.¹⁰⁰

3.3 Methodology

This study adopts a systematic qualitative research methodology aimed at understanding the challenges faced by SAARC and identifying pathways for its potential revitalisation. The research methodology combines primary data collected through key informant interviews with an extensive secondary literature review, ensuring a robust and comprehensive analysis.

3.3.1 Research Design

The research design follows a qualitative approach, structured around semi-structured interviews and thorough secondary literature analysis. Primary data is collected through interviews with individuals possessing expertise in SAARC, regional cooperation, and international relations, while secondary data is gathered from academic publications, policy reports, institutional documents, and expert discussions. This dual approach allows for a triangulated understanding of SAARC's operational dynamics, political challenges, and institutional constraints. The design ensures that findings are grounded both in empirical insights and in existing scholarly and policy-based knowledge.

3.3.2 Justification of Qualitative Method

A qualitative method is employed to capture the complex, context-dependent, and multifaceted nature of regional cooperation within South Asia. SAARC's effectiveness and challenges are deeply rooted in political, institutional, and socio-cultural factors that require in-depth, nuanced exploration beyond what quantitative methods could offer. Semi-structured interviews enable the elicitation of detailed insights and subjective experiences from key informants, facilitating a deeper understanding of both overt and underlying dynamics. Moreover, qualitative thematic analysis permits the identification of patterns and themes that may not be immediately apparent,¹⁰¹ allowing for a more comprehensive and critical interpretation of the challenges and prospects surrounding SAARC's revitalisation. This method is best suited to uncovering the complexities of regional cooperation initiatives, where perspectives, interests, and historical contexts interplay in intricate ways.

¹⁰⁰ Mervin Dharmasiri et al., *Sustainable Development Goals in SAARC Countries: Key Issues, Opportunities and Challenges* (Zenodo: CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8249545>.

¹⁰¹ Günter Mey, "Qualitative methodology," in *International handbook of psychology learning and teaching* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 453–478.

3.3.3 *Sampling Strategy*

A purposive sampling strategy is employed for selecting key informants. Participants are chosen based on their recognised expertise in SAARC-related affairs, regional cooperation, and international relations. The selection criteria prioritise individuals with direct experience in SAARC institutions, policymakers engaged in regional affairs, academics specialising in South Asian studies, and representatives from think tanks and research institutions. The goal is to gather diverse but informed perspectives that can provide both insider knowledge and critical analysis.¹⁰² Efforts are made to ensure a balanced representation across different sectors and viewpoints to capture the complexity of SAARC's operational environment and political landscape. While the sample size remains manageable to allow for in-depth interviews, it is sufficiently varied to reflect multiple dimensions of the regional cooperation discourse.

3.3.4 *Data Collection Techniques*

The primary method of data collection involves semi-structured interviews with key informants. These interviews are conducted using an interview guide designed to cover critical aspects such as institutional challenges, political dynamics, operational effectiveness, and potential strategies for SAARC's revival. The semi-structured format provides flexibility, allowing informants to elaborate on points they consider important while ensuring that the core research questions are consistently addressed.¹⁰³ All interviews are conducted with informed consent, recorded for accuracy, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, all data is anonymised during transcription and analysis.

Simultaneously, a thorough secondary literature review complements the primary data collection. This review includes scholarly articles, policy reports, newspaper articles, and theoretical studies relevant to SAARC and regional cooperation in South Asia. Institutional documents such as the SAARC Charter, SAARC Secretariat reports, and materials from SAARC Regional Centres are incorporated as supplementary sources. Expert opinions expressed during roundtable discussions organised by various institutions are also gathered to provide additional context and insights. The combination of interview data and secondary literature ensures that the research captures both contemporary expert viewpoints and broader

¹⁰² Denise DeRoeck, "The importance of engaging policy-makers at the outset to guide research on and introduction of vaccines: the use of policy-maker surveys," *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition* (2004): 322–330.

¹⁰³ Omolola A Adeoye-Olatunde and Nicole L Olenik, "Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews," *Journal of the American college of Clinical Pharmacy* 4, no. 10 (2021): 1358–1367.

historical and theoretical understandings of SAARC's evolution, challenges, and future prospects.

3.3.5 *Data Analysis Plan*

The data analysis follows a systematic and rigorous approach to derive nuanced insights into the challenges and revival prospects of SAARC. A thematic analysis is employed to examine the qualitative interview data, while insights from the secondary literature review are synthesised to complement and contextualise the findings. The analysis process begins with the transcription of interview recordings, followed by systematic reading and coding of transcripts. Initial codes are generated to capture recurring ideas, themes, and patterns in the participants' narratives. These codes are then refined and grouped into broader thematic categories that align with the study's objectives.

Key thematic categories identified include institutional constraints, political tensions among member states, operational inefficiencies, opportunities for institutional reform, pathways for economic cooperation, and socio-cultural challenges within SAARC. These themes are critically examined to reveal interconnected factors influencing SAARC's effectiveness and prospects for revitalisation. Special attention is given to capturing emergent themes that cut across different informants' perspectives, highlighting critical issues and potential areas of consensus or contention. To ensure methodological transparency and validity, triangulation is employed by cross-referencing findings from key informant interviews with evidence from secondary literature and expert roundtable discussions. This triangulation strengthens the credibility and reliability of the results, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in multiple sources of evidence. Where necessary, participant feedback is sought to verify the accuracy of interpretations, further enhancing the validity of the findings.

The secondary literature review is synthesised alongside the interview analysis, providing historical and contextual depth to the primary data. This synthesis examines the evolution of SAARC, the socio-political context of regional cooperation, and previous scholarly analyses of regionalism in South Asia. By integrating insights from diverse sources, the analysis offers a multidimensional understanding of SAARC's operational environment. The thematic analysis not only uncovers the complexities inherent in regional cooperation efforts but also provides a structured framework for developing evidence-based recommendations. These recommendations are aimed at strengthening SAARC's role in promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development across South Asia. The analytical outcomes contribute to policy discussions and scholarly debates on regionalism, offering

practical insights into addressing transnational challenges within the dynamic geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

This integrated methodological approach—combining systematic data collection, rigorous thematic analysis, and triangulation of sources—ensures a comprehensive and credible exploration of SAARC's challenges and prospects. The findings derived through this methodology are expected to contribute meaningfully to efforts aimed at enhancing regional cooperation and informing future policy initiatives within the South Asian context.

Chapter 4

Achievements and Accomplishments of SAARC

SAARC is often regarded as a ‘talking shop’ of the members because of the failure of any common venture.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, its inception marked a significant milestone in the region’s quest for regional cooperation, aiming to promote economic and social development through collective action and collaboration. Over the years, SAARC has made efforts to expand its agenda beyond economic cooperation to include social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. In particular, it includes nine areas of cooperation under the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) during the First SAARC Summit. These include agriculture, rural development, telecommunication, meteorology, health and population, scientific and technological cooperation, transport, postal services, sports, arts and culture.¹⁰⁵ However, over time, SAARC has included additional areas, such as economy and trade, education, environment, people-to-people connectivity, poverty alleviation, social development, tourism and so on, based on the needs and priorities of contemporary times.

Adoption of the SAARC Social Charter in 2004 and establishment of specialised centres and mechanisms for cooperation in areas such as health, agriculture, and climate change reflect SAARC’s evolving mandate.¹⁰⁶ Despite these initiatives, SAARC’s progress has been uneven, with periods of stagnation and setbacks overshadowing moments of cooperation and progress. The organisation’s inability to effectively address transnational challenges, such as terrorism, poverty, and natural disasters, has raised questions about its relevance and efficacy.¹⁰⁷ Yet, it is important to acknowledge the tangible achievements SAARC has garnered amid these challenges. This chapter is an attempt to highlight the existing activities of SAARC. It also showcases that, notwithstanding the absence of ministerial-level meetings, various initiatives have been taken by members at sectoral and sub-sectoral levels.

¹⁰⁴ “There isn’t very much to hear about Saarc,” *Dhaka Tribune*, June 29, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ *Compilation of SAARC Charter/Conventions/Agreements (1985–2016)* (Kathmandu: SAARC Secretariat, 2016).

¹⁰⁶ Mamta B Chowdhury, “Trade reforms and economic integration in South Asia: SAARC to SAPTA,” *Applied Econometrics and International Development* 5, no. 4 (2005).

¹⁰⁷ Swapan K Bhattacharya and Gouranga G Das, “Can South-South trade agreements reduce development deficits? An exploration of SAARC during 1995–2008,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 9, no. 3 (2014): 253–285.

4.1 Existing Initiatives and Areas of Cooperation

4.1.1 *Contribution to Social Sectors*

Education is the cornerstone for overall social development of South Asian nations since a significant number of people are illiterate. In this aspect, establishment of South Asian University (SAU) located in New Delhi represents a crucial venture not only for India but also for other members. The continued operation of SAU, which started its journey in 2010, has been recognised as one of the successful ventures of South Asian countries for ensuring quality education at tertiary levels. The motto of the university is ‘knowledge beyond borders’, which widened the scope of students from eight member countries to know about history, culture, politics, economy and other areas of mutual interest.

SAARC posited a low level of Human Development Index (HDI); hence, attaining SDG targets is crucial by 2030 for members. It already emphasised five key areas to promote social agenda, mainly the Social Charter, health and population activities, children and youth and gender-related concerns, including women empowerment. The SAARC Social Charter, signed at the 12th Summit in Islamabad in 2004, addressed various social challenges like gender inequality, unemployment problems, drug trafficking and so on. Following the Summit, the National Coordination Committees (NCCs) and Technical Committee on Women Youth were formed, and the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements on the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia was signed in 2002 to continue and expedite these efforts.

4.1.2 *Establishment of Specialised Centres and Bodies*

Although SAARC is not operational significantly at the top level, it is working by setting up 12 specialised centres. Through these establishments, cooperation has been facilitated in various sectors, including agriculture, health, education, and culture.¹⁰⁸ To ensure this, since 1989, various regional centres at different times have been founded, which include SAC (1989, Dhaka); SAARC Energy Centre (SEC, Islamabad, 2006); SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC, Colombo, 2009); SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC, Kathmandu 1992); SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC, New Delhi, 2016) and a host of others. SAARC also established several institutions such as the SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO), South Asian University (SAU), SDF Secretariat and SAARC Regional Standards Organization (SARSO). With those, SAARC serves as a platform for

¹⁰⁸ Saha, “South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)”.

dialogue and collaboration among member states, providing opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagements on issues of mutual concern.

4.1.3 *Agriculture and Livelihoods*

There are two ongoing projects under the SAC located in Dhaka. One is the “Livelihood Enhancement Project” funded by the SDF worth US\$ 2 million.¹⁰⁹ Five member states are part of this project, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, India and Sri Lanka. The project is mainly focusing on post-harvest losses, which are from 10 to 40 per cent in every state. It was started in 2018 to minimise the losses, but COVID-19 slowed down the progress; however, the activities are still going on. In addition to member states, about 1,000 smallholder beneficiaries are involved in this project to improve their livelihood enhancement. The second project is on the “Consortium for Scaling-up Climate Smart Agriculture in South Asia (C-SUCSeS)”. Intending to foster cooperation and partnership, this four-year programme is a joint initiative among the SAC, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and SDF. The main aims of this programme include working on the climate-smart agriculture (CSA) agenda, setting up productive and systemic mechanisms for knowledge-sharing, policy dialogue, cooperation in research and development programmes on CSA, promoting sustainable agriculture intensification and enhancing capacity in South Asia in the sector of CSA strategies and technologies. This project aims to directly help 7,500 smallholders along with researchers, extension workers and policymakers of South Asian states. However, around 50 thousand smallholders will indirectly benefit from this project.

Besides, there are need-based programmes in which SAC is currently working in six thematic areas, including Agriculture, Horticulture, Livestock, Fisheries, Priority Setting and Programme Development, and Natural Resource Management. Every year, SAC arranges at least twenty programmes where members from every state join. Also, SAC is involved in executing its programmes and activities in collaboration with the National Agricultural Research System (NARS), the National Agricultural Extension System (NAES), the State Agricultural University (SAU) and other development partners. From the learnings of the programmes, SAC publishes books, papers, monographs and other documents to recommend policies to SAARC countries. Even though the SAARC summit has not been held for the last 10 years, agriculture ministers’ summits have not been stopped.

¹⁰⁹ Information gathered from the interview with Senior Program Specialist (Livestock) & Project Coordinator, SAC, on September 29, 2024.

On 27 June 2019, just before COVID-19 started, the 4th Ministers Meeting of SAC took place in Thimphu, Bhutan. Besides, the governing board meetings are held regularly as well.

4.1.4 *Food and Energy Security*

SAARC has been instrumental in initiating regional dialogues and collaborations on critical issues such as energy security, food security, rural development and more specifically, the empowerment of women and children. The SAARC Regional Food Bank, signed in 2007 during the 14th SAARC Summit, aimed at ensuring a food security reserve during times of food crisis or emergencies.¹¹⁰ This initiative was taken to provide support during the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Besides, during the 7th SAARC Summit in November 2011, the SAARC Seed Bank Agreement was issued to expedite the efforts of national seed security through collective action as well as inter-country partnerships among the member countries. Accordingly, the first and second meetings initiated by the SAARC Seed Bank Board Ministerial Meeting were held in April 2016 and January 2019, respectively, to facilitate the exchange of seeds and germplasms in five years of duration and share of potential crop varieties among the member countries. Besides, the SDF, aimed at financing regional projects in social, economic, and infrastructure sectors, are significant milestones in SAARC's journey towards comprehensive regional cooperation.

Cooperation in the energy sector is pertinent to ensure energy security among the member countries of SAARC. Several countries (e.g., Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan) are heavily dependent on non-renewable energy, which accounts for nearly one-third of their total energy consumption (75%), while Nepal and Bhutan predominantly rely on renewable energy such as biomass and hydroelectricity. One of the major concerns of the member countries is accessing clean and affordable energy. Realising this, the Energy Centre came into being through the Dhaka Declaration in 2005 to fulfil the vision of creating an Energy Ring in South Asia.¹¹¹ The primary purpose of setting up this Centre is to transform the energy challenges into opportunities and assist the member countries by facilitating dialogue regarding the new avenues of cooperation in this sector. This platform involves various stakeholders like government officials, academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) workers for

¹¹⁰ SAARC Secretariat, "Areas of Cooperation," SAARC Press Release, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://saarc-sec.org/index.php/press-release/38-areas-of-cooperation?start=8>.

¹¹¹ SAARC Energy Centre, "About Us," <https://www.saarcenergy.org/about-us/>.

finding out the untapped potential in various sectors, including hydropower development, enhancement of renewable and alternative energy and preservation of energy resources, including improving its efficacy in this region.

4.1.5 *Connectivity*

Connectivity is important for SAARC nations since they are interconnected. At the 18th SAARC Summit in 2014, three proposals were given related to regional agreements for connectivity. However, due to tension between India and Pakistan, the agreements were not materialised on the ground, but an agreement was approved on the SAARC Market of Electricity (SAME), which aims to establish a ‘SAARC energy grid’ among the member countries. Besides, for South Asia, the transport corridor is pertinent to act as an economic corridor that includes the improvement of infrastructure for harnessing economic opportunities. Since 1985 to date, several agreements have been signed focusing on road, rail and digital connectivity and other issues related to corridors, customs cooperation, coastal shipping and border development. Examples include the Asian and Trans Asian Railway Agreement (1985-2005), e-customs and SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study (SRMTS, 2006-2011), Integrated Check Post (ICP) and border hats (2011-2014).

4.1.6 *Economy/Trade*

Initially, SAARC focused on enhancing regional economic cooperation, with a particular emphasis on trade liberalisation and economic integration.¹¹² The early years saw the adoption of various agreements and protocols aimed at reducing trade barriers, promoting intra-regional trade, and fostering economic growth.¹¹³ To enhance trade, in various SAARC summits, SAARC discussed the need for extra-regional foreign direct investment (FDI), intra-regional investment, multilateral investment agreements, the role of private sectors, etc. During the 14th (New Delhi, 2007) and 15th (Colombo, 2008) SAARC Summits, the Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments was finalised. SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) is another noteworthy venture to bolster trade and investment among the member countries.

However, one notable accomplishment is the establishment of the SAFTA in 2006 along with its Trade Liberalisation Programme, which aimed to create a duty-free trading bloc within the region. SAFTA has facilitated an increase in intra-regional

¹¹² Saha, “South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)”.

¹¹³ Majid, “SAARC prospects and challenges”.

trade, albeit modest, and has laid the groundwork for further economic integration. SAFTA is one of the significant achievements of SAARC, aiming to promote intra-regional trade and economic integration. In 2008, five leading think tanks in South Asia organised the South Asia Economic Summit (SAES) to enhance regional economic cooperation. Until 2017, summits were regularly organised to boost trade, investment, e-trade, trade facilitation, and so on.

4.1.7 *Health*

The COVID-19 period was a great moment since it helped to bring all the South Asian nations under the same umbrella. Since the region comprises more than one-fifth of the population, addressing this pandemic was a great challenge for most of the nations. In 40 years, the countries witnessed the worst economic performance due to lockdown, social distancing, disruption of food supply and other logistic support. During this period, fund allocation worth US\$10 million and the arrangement of a virtual summit on 15th March 2020, headed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were seen as an unprecedented move forward.¹¹⁴ The countries also set up an Integrated Surveillance Portal to conduct research on this pandemic and find out probable ways to condemn it. With these initiatives, the countries saw the indication of the revitalisation process of SAARC.

The meetings of the SAARC Health Ministers were held at certain intervals between 2003 to 2020 in different cities of the member countries. The meetings act as a platform to address various communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, nutrition, water and sanitation and other health care services. In particular, SAARC's concerted efforts in the fields of health have borne fruit through initiatives like the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre, which has played a crucial role in combating these diseases across member states.

4.1.8 *Environment and Climate Change*

In South Asia, countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan are landlocked, while others like Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka have long coastlines. They have shared river basins that include the Indus River Basin (among Afghanistan, India and Pakistan), and the Ganga–Brahmaputra Meghna River Basin (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal). Besides, the countries share a mountain system and access to the ocean. Therefore, any country that is vulnerable to a gross natural disaster is likely to have crucial impacts on neighbours. Therefore,

¹¹⁴ Mahaseth and Pandey, "COVID-19 battle revitalized".

preservation of the environment and forestry is of high priority to reduce natural disasters and address climate change problems. In this vein, environmental cooperation has seen progress, particularly with the SAARC Environment Ministers' meetings and Technical Committee on Environment and Forestry, which have led to collaborative efforts in tackling climate change, disaster management and other measures of environmental protection.

To bolster further cooperation, a series of specialised centres have been set up like SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC, 2004), SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC, 2007), SDMC, (2006), and SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC, 1995). These centres have distinct frameworks under which the centres set their agendas to address various issues of environment, climate change and natural disasters. Lastly, in 2010, SAARC issued the 2010 Convention on Cooperation on Environment aiming at addressing environmental challenges. This convention, characterised as 'inclusive' and 'comprehensive', was implemented in 2013, and the primary aim was to build cooperation in the environmental sector through the exchange of best practices, capacity building and transfer of eco-friendly knowledge. Since it can access the SDF fund, it acts as a powerful policy instrument for materialising the environmental policy on the ground.

4.1.9 *Counterterrorism*

Counterterrorism is identified as a shared challenge among SAARC members and, therefore, SAARC attaches a significant focus on this area. The organisation has taken several initiatives to suppress terrorism and strengthen cooperation in combating the threat. In 2001, SAARC adopted the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, which aimed at increasing collaboration among the member countries that include sharing of intelligence, enforcing law and order and other legal frameworks. In addition, with the initiative of the SAARC Terrorism Prevention Work Plan, the organisation has set up a certain mechanism to promulgate dialogues on issues such as security and counterterrorism. Through this venture, precise actions, strategies, and joint exercises were taken to address cross-border terrorism. These collaborative efforts, nonetheless, show SAARC's commitment to ensure regional peace and security.

4.1.10 *Culture, Tourism and People-to-People Connectivity*

South Asian countries are rich in culture and heritage. In the World Heritage Site, 54 sites are occupied with special attention and attraction.¹¹⁵ In the cultural domain, SAARC has successfully promoted regional solidarity through various cultural exchanges and festivals that celebrate the shared heritage and diversity of South Asia. The SAARC Cultural Centre, established in 2009 in Sri Lanka, serves as a hub for these activities, fostering a sense of regional identity and mutual respect among members. It works as a platform to enhance regional harmony and connection through intercultural dialogue and plays a vital role in preserving and conserving the cultural heritage sites in the region within the domain of the SAARC Agenda for Culture.

SAARC visa exemption for government officials is one of the significant initiatives by members. There is a recent initiative to create a virtual platform for exchanging updated information and issuing stickers (for ministers, secretaries, high court judges, etc.). Another initiative is promoting tourism by the private sector. Every year, specific apex bodies such as renowned businesspersons, journalists, and sports persons are facilitated through SAARC's associated programmes to visit SAARC countries to promote trade and investment.

Despite its struggles, SAARC's initiatives have laid the foundation for a more integrated and cooperative South Asia. Article 10 of this platform gives strength to smaller nations, which are given equal status at the SAARC summits. Thus, the organisation's ability to convene member states for dialogue and collaboration on shared concerns continues to be a vital asset. Moving forward, it is imperative to build on these achievements by addressing the existing challenges and leveraging the potential for regional cooperation that SAARC represents. The next sections will delve deeper into the specific achievements of SAARC, exploring the concrete impacts and outcomes of its initiatives across various sectors.

¹¹⁵ Pradip Kumar Sarker, Md Saifur Rahman and Lukas Giessen, "Regional economic regimes and the environment: stronger institutional design is weakening environmental policy capacity of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation," *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 13, no. 3 (2023).

4.2 Bilateral and Trilateral Collaboration Under SAARC

For any country, bilateral investment treaties are an important source to get in international investment flows. In the context of South Asia, countries are engaged with 204 bilateral investment treaties, and of them, only five are signed among the member countries.¹¹⁶ Among five, two are signed between India-Nepal and Bangladesh-Pakistan, but these are not implemented as yet. The other three are between India and Sri Lanka (operation since 13 February 1998), Pakistan and Sri Lanka (since 05 January 2000), and India and Bangladesh (since 07 July 2011).

Multilateral initiatives among the members are insignificant. SAARC has brought together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in a partnership aimed at promoting regional prosperity. One other arrangement in the region that has been able to promote a similar end is the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme. SASEC focuses on improving cross-border connectivity, facilitating faster and less costly trade among member countries, and strengthening regional economic cooperation, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) serving as the secretariat and lead financier. This shows how such arrangements are rare and much needed within this region. Additionally, the SAARC Development Fund supports regional opportunities through three financing windows: social, economic, and infrastructure. Under the SASEC transport programme, efforts have been made to improve regional connectivity to increase subregional trade and enhance the competitiveness of local industries, particularly in landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal, where inadequate cross-border infrastructure results in high transport costs and hinders regional integration and trade with indirect neighbours. Excluding India, trade with other SASEC and SAARC member countries accounts for only 0.8 per cent of Nepal's total trade.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Indra Nath Mukherji, "Potential for Intra-Regional Investment," in *South Asian Cooperation: Issues Old and New*, ed. Paras Kharel (India: South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (Swatree), 2018).

¹¹⁷ Asian Development Bank, *South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation Highway Improvement Project: Report and Recommendation of the President* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2012).

Chapter 5

Challenges of SAARC

When formed, SAARC was aimed at promoting and enhancing regional cooperation. But it has become moribund for quite some time. Despite its founding principles and initial aspirations, SAARC has faced numerous challenges throughout its evolution. Political tensions and bilateral disputes among members have often hindered the organisation's effectiveness and impeded progress on regional cooperation initiatives. Additionally, structural limitations, including the principle of consensus-based decision-making and absence of a supranational authority, constrained its ability to address pressing regional issues. There have been many attempts at reviving it, but as a regional grouping, it faces numerous obstacles in that regard and thus, could not prosper, unlike other equivalent entities. There are economic, military, cultural and other challenges that profoundly handicap the body from effective functioning. Challenges are often quite overlapping and consequently, may seem repetitive. In most evaluations, the scenario of SAARC is one of hopelessness as major actors lack that will, engaged in enmity instead of cooperation, while others are dealing with their crises and are not in a position to take the responsibilities concerning their lesser capacities.

5.1 Major Challenges and Concerns of SAARC

5.1.1 *Structural*

5.1.1.1 *Constitutional Issues*

The Charter of SAARC is based on a consensus formula. Hence, while discussing challenges to reviving the organisation, structural ones come first. Article 10 (2) says, “Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations”.¹¹⁸ This in itself is a hurdle. South Asian nations have historical linkages and colonial legacies in many cases keep on giving rise to modern-day mutual disputes. But under this provision, they cannot be raised in multilateral fora and need rather to be bilaterally discussed. This further complicates dispute

¹¹⁸ Article X, Clause 2, SAARC Charter.

resolution, resulting in stalemate and prolonging hostility and mistrust. The very first clause of the Charter, “Desirous of promoting peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and non-alignment.....”,¹¹⁹ established keeping bloc/alliance politics during the Cold War era in consideration, could not ensure neutrality either in those days or afterwards. Still, the clause remains and, even after momentous changes taking place globally over 40 years, has not been updated; South Asia has witnessed many transformations in different affairs, especially with growing power competition involving regional and extra-regional powers alike, producing new equations. An Indian Scholar from O.P. Jindal Global University explained this issue in the following way,¹²⁰

“The major problem lies in political animosity. Now, I doubt the inclusion of certain topics for further discussion within the SAARC Charter. Irrespective of political issues at hand, how can the member countries go forward?”

5.1.1.2 Absence of Provisions about Inclusion or Exclusion

Provisions regarding inclusion/expulsion of members are absent in the document, even if a member is found breaching the organisation’s rules or an unexpected situation arises. This is why the accession of Afghanistan created some debate among the earlier seven members¹²¹ as that country has repeatedly been a victim of war, foreign intervention and instability. Its ruling Taliban government was accused of widespread brutality against other groups and common Afghans; the country, furthermore, has a somewhat ambiguous geographic identity given its proximity to Central and Western Asia. Myanmar also applied in July 2008 for full membership. However, the country is located in Southeast Asia and is a full-fledged ASEAN member. Such issues are not addressed by the Charter. Countries have not remained neutral and occasionally do intervene in others’ internal matters. For example, it is alleged that during the Sri Lankan Civil War, Pakistan provided the Sri Lankan government with military and logistical assistance.¹²² Conversely, India

¹¹⁹ Article 1, SAARC Charter.

¹²⁰ Professor, International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, Former Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Former Director, MAKAIAS, India, interview taken on August 28, 2024.

¹²¹ Shamima Nasreen, “Inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC: from reluctance to sudden rush,” *The Daily Star*, March 15, 2008.

¹²² Patryk Kugiel, “End of Sri Lankan Civil War—International Aspects,” *Bulletin*, no. 44 (July 22, 2009): 88.

showed empathy towards the Tamils in Sri Lanka, who faced significant challenges including concerns of human rights.¹²³

5.1.1.3 Poor Budgetary Allocation

Due to a lack of consensus and a mentality of cooperation, the budget cannot be allocated to issues emerging from common threats. Hierarchy is observed acutely, and without getting the green signal of the highest authority (i.e., authority delegated for that section of SAARC),¹²⁴ it is hard to materialise any issue or event. Budget issues are also seen in contentious disputes between SAARC member states, where bilateral tensions get in the way of approving the budget for cooperative SAARC initiatives that benefit multiple parties. Although SAARC nations regularly confront a number of pressing traditional and non-traditional security risks, including open, long-running conflicts (e.g., Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir issue), there is hardly any scope for cooperation in military-security affairs like a regional peacekeeping/united security force. Unlike regional blocks like the EU or Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), SAARC has a lacking of institutional mechanisms to deal with collective threats due to weak budgetary framework. This limitation is deeply rooted in SAARC Charter since neither the main Charter nor its Provisional Rules of Procedure talks about these concerns. The poor budgetary allocation adversely impacts on SAARC's operational capacity, thereby, the organisation has been incapable in mobilising its strengths and resources. It is also observed that in most cases, the budget cannot be activated to address common challenges that the member countries are currently facing. Besides, there are issues and concerns related to fund disbursement in the SDF (e.g., delayed disbursements and underutilised funds). Due to these financial and structural deficiencies, members are not getting funds in due time to implement the projects even when they get accepted by everyone. In addition, SAARC suffers because of ineffective implementation and monitoring systems. These are, nonetheless, undermining the overall credibility of SAARC being a platform for regional cooperation.

¹²³ S D Muni, "Indian Tamil politics and the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict," *ISAS Brief*, no. 86, (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2008): 01–02.

¹²⁴ Ahmed, *Regionalism and regional security in South Asia*.

5.1.1.4 *Lack of Trust, Political Will, and Common Vision*

SAARC members face trust deficits, a lack of political will, divergent priorities, and these issues have been emphasised by scholars of Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. More specifically, on the issue of political will, a scholar from Sri Lanka commented,¹²⁵

“While there is recognition of SAARC’s importance, a lack of political will has stalled progress. For example, both India and Pakistan have the potential to benefit from cooperation in trade and connectivity, but domestic politics and bilateral tensions prevent this from materialising. The political will to transcend domestic concerns...hence, focus on regional cooperation is essential, but it remains elusive in key member states”.

It is also observed that, unlike other regional organisations, the member countries (especially India and Pakistan) hardly work on a common platform. Instead of multilateral arrangements, they prefer to cooperate bilaterally because of conflicts over various issues. As remarked by an expert from India,¹²⁶

“.... Ongoing India-Pakistan conflicts, especially over Kashmir, have resulted in stalled cooperation, as political disagreements often disrupt SAARC’s agendas and meetings. The rivalry between India and Pakistan is perhaps the most significant obstacle to SAARC’s functioning. This tension paralyses SAARC’s ability to make unanimous decisions.”

The EU, for example, thrived amid internal conflicts because of putting the ‘European Vision’ on top of its priority list. In 2000, SAARC members initiated a motor vehicle agreement. However, due to a lack of vision and rivalry, the goal of a common motor vehicle market was never achieved; they never prioritised potential benefits over political tensions.

5.1.1.5 *Absence of a Dispute Resolution Mechanism and Time-Consuming Method*

The consensus method of SAARC is creating issues for quick implementation of agricultural and other programmes required for collective benefits. Whenever SAARC wants to take an initiative or arrange a programme, they have to wait to get a consensus from the head of every member state. Hence, it takes time to

¹²⁵ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview on September 09, 2024.

¹²⁶ Vice President, International Relations and Global Marketing of Washington University of Science & Technology (WUST), Virginia, US and Former Pro Vice Chancellor, PR & Media, Adamas University, Kolkata, online interview on September 09, 2024.

implement a project or address an issue that needs an immediate solution. Similarly, SAARC could not function properly due to bilateral conflicts, but the disputes cannot be resolved due to the absence of a formal dispute resolution mechanism. As a result, over the years, conflicts have persisted among the member states. Due to the presence of conflicts, time-bound projects are hard to implement.

5.1.2 *Economic*

5.1.2.1 *Less Integration/Connectivity*

Any entity, especially those focused on cooperation, needs strong economic performance to prosper. A regional bloc must have wide-ranging economic interactions between and among members. That, unfortunately, is not the case for SAARC. South Asia has almost 22 per cent of the global population and a 3 per cent share of the global economy.¹²⁷ However, it is also the world's least integrated region.¹²⁸ There is hardly any active economic cooperation, albeit several bodies have been established for that purpose, for example, SDF, SAFTA, SAARC Arbitration Council, SAARC Human Resources Development Centre, SAARC Agriculture Centre, and many more. However, aside from the SDF, which oversees and sponsors different projects in social, economic and infrastructure, and presently has 12 ongoing projects with 5 approved¹²⁹, to some extent, none of these initiatives can be called successful in terms of functionality. Improved connectivity remains a distant possibility. Instead of enhancing, countries have become suspicious and often non-cooperative when it comes to connectivity, citing security and other causes. Nowadays, South Asian countries focus more on national or sectoral connectivity (e.g., corridors and border developments, coastal shipping, digital connectivity and so on) rather than the region as a whole.¹³⁰ Thus, the lack of comprehensive connectivity is a hindrance to making a common market in South Asia.

5.1.2.2 *Less Achievement through SAFTA*

The SAFTA was launched with high expectations in January 2006 but achieved nothing in its over 18 years of existence. India's diversified market limits

¹²⁷ Deepak Chaudhary, "Challenges and potential of SAARC in comparison with ASEAN," *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 22, no. 2 (December 2022): 110.

¹²⁸ Sultan Hafeez Rahman, Sridhar Khatri and Hans-Peter Brunner, eds., *Regional Integration and Economic Integration in South Asia* (Glasgow, UK: Asian Development Bank and Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2012), 391.

¹²⁹ SAARC Development Fund, "Our Projects," <https://www.sdfsec.org/what-we-do/our-projects/>.

¹³⁰ Prabir De, "Connectivity 2.0: South Asian Economic Union," in *South Asian Cooperation: Issues Old and New*, ed. Paras Kharel (India: Swatee, 2018).

Bangladesh's entry and its utilisation of SAPTA and SAFTA. Several reasons can be cited behind this fiasco. Most countries (other than India) in this region have narrow, undiversified export bases. Like its structural weaknesses, no provision existed in SAARC to deal with economic uncertainties. This is evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian War and now the Israel-Hamas War taking deep tolls on their economies as their imports, exports, and finding new markets are all in jeopardy, especially those dependent more on imports. Members may have their strategies, but no concerted effort has been undertaken in this regard.

5.1.2.3 Lack of FTA, Minimal Intra-SAARC Trade and Overall Connectivity

There is a lack of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and participation in regional production networks that, in turn, impedes broader economic relations. It is observed that involvement in regional value chains helps to enter global value chains, which are missing in South Asia. Intra-SAARC trade remains very low to this day: as per the World Bank, that figure is about 5 per cent.¹³¹ Member states speak about promoting free trade or liberalisation of trade frequently, but in reality, they engage in protectionism, dumping and other harmful measures. Therefore, the SAARC Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments was a sluggish process.¹³² Also, South Asian countries lag behind in doing meaningful energy cooperation due to the lack of infrastructure and the imbalance of trade. These macro-level barriers ultimately hinder regional cooperation.

Transport connectivity has progressed in a very limited way since the very beginning of SAARC. As remarked by a Sri Lankan scholar,¹³³

“South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions globally in terms of trade and connectivity. Compared to other regions, such as East Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, intra-regional trade in South Asia is minimal. This lack of integration hampers efforts to boost economic cooperation and growth across the member states”.

As yet, there is a lack of an efficient and secure transport network, and it is identified as a major hindrance to intra-regional growth.¹³⁴ For enhancing connectivity, the initiative of SAARC– Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) could not

¹³¹ Imran Ali and Ali Mufti, “Enhancing intra-regional trade in SAARC: a survey of potential competitive commodities,” *Review of International Political Economy* (May 2022): 5.

¹³² Mukherji, “Potential for Intra-Regional Investment”.

¹³³ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadigamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview on September 08, 2024.

¹³⁴ Prabir De, “Connectivity 2.0”.

be materialised due to a lack of consensus from Pakistan at the 18th SAARC Summit in Nepal in 2014. Whereas transport corridors have the potential to act as a trade corridor at the regional level and can serve as a significant milestone. Unfortunately, it is realised that SAARC member countries prioritise national-level ventures instead of regional trade facilitation agendas.

5.1.2.4 Imbalance in and Conflict over Resources

South Asia has deep discrepancies in resource allocation. That is to say, some countries are endowed with natural and manmade resources, while others are lacking. India, for example, is rich in both. One instance may suffice: the country has large deposits of gold, diamonds, and other precious minerals and is a known exporter. Pakistan has various resources, but political and economic instability often thwarts their effective utilisation. Bangladesh, on the other hand, is nearly deprived of resources, both natural or manmade, and imports are quite large. Poverty remains a major obstacle; South Asia is home to nearly 156 million poor people.¹³⁵ This situation persists despite various endeavours, forcing countries to spend large funds on alleviation, and as a result, other development activities continue to suffer from inadequate funding. Resource sharing, regardless of bi- or multilateral basis, has been a source of disputes and that goes on, especially water. This is true of mineral resources like oil and gas, onshore and offshore alike. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, everyone has their fair share of these. All these factors combined are adding to the woes of the group.

5.1.2.5 More Focus on Sub-regional Groups

SAARC countries have strategically shifted their focus towards sub-regional groupings (such as the ASEAN, BIMSTEC and IORA) and more to the outer world. These sub-regional alliances are seen as more effective platforms for countries' geopolitical and economic objectives. Notably, the emergence of BIMSTEC has posed challenges for SAARC in resuming its activities. Since BIMSTEC does not include Pakistan as a member, it allows India to pursue its "Look East Policy" without the complications arising from its longstanding rivalry with Pakistan. Consequently, sub-regional groupings like BIMSTEC prove to be more advantageous for India compared to efforts aimed at revitalising SAARC. This point is also raised by a scholar from Lahore University, Pakistan¹³⁶

¹³⁵ UNICEF *End of Year Results Summary Extended Narrative* (Nepal: Regional Office for South Asia, 2024), 9.

¹³⁶ Head of the Department, Associate Professor, Political Science, School of Integrated Social Sciences (SISS), University of Lahore, Pakistan, online interview on August 2024.

“India is promoting sub-regional groupings like BIMSTEC...to distance other South Asian countries from Pakistan and foster regional cooperation. India is also advancing projects through SASEC aimed at enhancing regional trade, transport, and energy infrastructure, with investments exceeding US\$9 billion. Additionally, India is developing a multi-national transport infrastructure through various platforms and re-engaging Iran to access Afghanistan via the Chabahar Port, bypassing Pakistan”.

Furthermore, the absence of India, which holds a prominent leadership position in South Asia, makes the resumption of SAARC’s activities highly improbable. Therefore, the participation and support of India are crucial for any potential revival of SAARC’s operations.

5.1.3 Political

5.1.3.1 Blame Game about the Issues of Bilateral Conflicts

Even though SAARC nations tried to exclude political issues, the bloc has always been hostage to the rivalry among states’ political issues (Table 5.1). It is alleged that political challenges remain at the core of SAARC’s failure and its revival. The persistent Indo-Pak rivalry is a glaring example of how an organisation can fail miserably, and this was agreed by the scholars of South Asia interviewed for the study.¹³⁷ They agreed that this rivalry had been responsible for the failure of other and related enterprises too, by the group as a whole. Since 1947, the problem exists, and they are still perennial enemies. After the Mumbai attack of 2008, the relationship deteriorated and created a stalemate. While discussing security issues of India, an Indian security expert highlighted the point that,¹³⁸

“We have repeatedly told Pakistan to address the terrorism issues, but nothing much has happened. If this concern is effectively addressed, perhaps cooperation would have been transmitted more smoothly and swiftly”.

¹³⁷ As also mentioned in Anupam Agarwal and Deepak Jain, “SAARC’s Strategic Resurgence: Impasse and Opportunities,” *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal* 26, no. 2 (2022): 1–11.

¹³⁸ Former Centre Head, Neighbourhood Studies and Former Director, MAKIAS, India, online interview on August 27, 2024.

Table 5.1. Existing Bilateral Conflicts among South Asian Nations¹³⁹

States	Areas of Conflict
India-Pakistan	Over Territory: Siachen Glacier, Kargil and Sir Creek Over Natural Resources: Baglihar dam is being built over River Chenab Terrorism Issues: Both blame each other for an increase in terrorist activities
India-Bangladesh	Over Natural Resources: Ganga River and the construction of Farakka Barrage; Teesta water sharing issue Over Refugee Issues: Illegal immigrants entering from Bangladesh to India, as claimed by India
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Over Territory: Durand Line Over Refugee: Pakistan is shutting down refugee camps built for Afghans
Nepal-Bhutan	Over Refugee: Repatriation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal

On the contrary, a scholar from Pakistan attributed the issue to India by saying,¹⁴⁰

“India is the biggest member in terms of development and population of SAARC. It must settle its disputes with Pakistan. Since 1947, India and Pakistan’s hostile relations, mainly due to the Kashmir dispute, have negatively impacted SAARC’s efficacy. India, the largest political, economic, and military power in South Asia, holds significant influence over SAARC, which it has often used to undermine Pakistan.”

As both countries are nuclear powers, fear of a devastating war is always present, and they continue to fight each other regularly.¹⁴¹ Mutual accusations of efforts to destabilise are commonplace. However, given the Charter’s emphasis on bilateral discussion, these tensions cannot be effectively raised or discussed at SAARC fora. Even if raised, others’ opinions hardly matter as these two do not pay heed. Some South Asian countries have considerable levels of political unrest. For instance, Pakistan has long been ruled by its military, which complicates situations for itself, and the recent economic crisis worsened that further. Likewise, Sri Lanka

¹³⁹ Pachori, “Conflicts in South Asia”.

¹⁴⁰ Head of the Department, Associate Professor, Political Science, School of Integrated Social Sciences (SISS), University of Lahore, Pakistan, online interview on August 29, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Paul Kapur, “India and Pakistan’s unstable peace: Why nuclear South Asia is not like cold war Europe,” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 127–152.

has been grappling with similar crises that reduce its ability to engage with SAARC on a broader scale.

Afghanistan-Pakistan hostilities represent a new issue of concern. Once, Pakistan was a close ally of Afghanistan. However, since the invasion of the USA in 2001, relations have witnessed fluctuations and visibly worsened since 2011, as porous borders facilitate easy communications between insurgent groups in both nations. When the USA withdrew and the Taliban took over in 2021, tensions acquired new dimensions, with sporadic border conflicts taking place between Afghanistan and Pakistan. India was, from the very beginning, opposed to the Taliban and supported the USA-backed Karzai government. The Taliban itself has recognition from very few countries. India does not recognise them but said it would assist if needed.¹⁴² Though it now has very limited interactions with them, mistrust sustains due to the latter's strictly conservative policies. This prevailing mistrust has been a recurring factor among other members that contributed to the failure of SAARC: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives; none have been immune.

5.1.3.2 India's Role

India, the largest country and economy in South Asia, enjoys various strategic advantages. However, at times, its policies and positions generate apprehension among other members. For example, during the 19th SAARC Summit, which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2016, India declined to join, raising the issue of cross-border terrorist attacks. Following that, other countries decided not to join in the summit. This position has turned into a 'political fashion' and experts view this as an instance of India's 'coercive regional diplomacy' that ultimately strains the trade relations among the member countries.¹⁴³ An academic from the University of Dhaka (DU) stated in this aspect,¹⁴⁴

"India shows its protectionist policy to preserve its economic interest, which has created a gross imbalance in trade."

This statement is also corroborated by a government official while analysing the prospect of an agreement,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Rezaul H Laskar, "Want good India-Afghanistan relations, says Taliban leader," *The Hindustan Times*, August 30, 2021.

¹⁴³ K C Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating cooperation, institutional structures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 102.

¹⁴⁴ Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka (DU), interview taken on June 13, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁴⁵ High Official of SAARC & BIMSTEC wing, MoFA, interview taken on July 03 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

“We tried to finalise some agreements, but because of the major powers, it was not signed finally. It is for sure that with the presence of regional antagonism, seamless connectivity is not possible”.

It has been observed that relations between the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its neighbours have at times experienced moments of strain, influenced in part by certain ethno-religious narratives that have surfaced in political discourse.¹⁴⁶ Given the historical sensitivity of such issues in South Asia, where they have often played a role in shaping political dynamics, these developments could present challenges for the smooth functioning of SAARC. Such concerns are further heightened by instances of religious and ethnic tensions, which can influence perceptions across the region. In response, some neighbouring states have, at times, put forward their own narratives, occasionally extending territorial claims. Additionally, external influences remain a factor in regional geopolitics, with Pakistan maintaining a longstanding strategic partnership with China, and India with the US. This, however, continues to shape the broader dynamics of regional cooperation.

5.1.4 *Threats of Insurgency*

South Asia faces multifaceted military threats that subvert its cooperation prospects and the revival of SAARC. The Kashmir issue has already been spoken of, and cross-border terrorism has been identified as a key apprehension between India and Pakistan, as remarked by India’s External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar.¹⁴⁷ Besides its enmity with Pakistan, for some years, India has been in conflict with China. While China and Pakistan are close allies, India has shifted more towards the West now, notably the USA, which has developed significant mistrust of Pakistan, been vying with China in South Asia and adjacent areas.¹⁴⁸ India also has insurgency problems in its Northeast and Punjab (the Khalistan Movement). Similar insurgencies are more widespread in neighbouring Pakistani provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Balochistan, etc. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), consisting of various affiliated groups, continues to be a significant presence that shapes the region’s security landscape.¹⁴⁹ Pakistan’s complex regional dynamics extend beyond its relations with India and Afghanistan, as seen in its recent border tensions with Iran.

¹⁴⁶ Kris Ruijgrok, “The authoritarian practice of issuing internet shutdowns in India: The Bharatiya Janata Party’s direct and indirect responsibility,” *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (2022): 611–633.

¹⁴⁷ “There isn’t very much to hear about SAARC,” *Dhaka Tribune*.

¹⁴⁸ Raj Verma, “Multi-alignment and India’s response to the Russia–Ukraine war,” *International Politics* 61, no. 5 (2024): 954–974.

¹⁴⁹ Cristiane Sâmia Carvalho, “Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: a comparative analysis between 1996 and 2021,” *Revista de Gestão e Secretariado* 15, no. 4 (2024): e3662–e3662.

Additionally, concerns about terrorism and extremism within Pakistan have been frequently raised by India and other international actors.

Bangladesh continues to navigate occasional security threats in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), which resurfaced of late, i.e., the Kuki-Chin insurgency. The ongoing Rohingya movements, the Myanmar Civil War, and the displacement of both Myanmar citizens and military personnel into neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and India, have heightened concerns about potential spillover effects.¹⁵⁰ There have been reports suggesting the presence of certain Myanmar insurgent groups operating in the CHT region.¹⁵¹ At the same time, South Asia is witnessing an intensifying focus on military capabilities, with a growing emphasis on arms procurement and modernisation. Both India and Pakistan, despite economic constraints in the latter's case, continue to advance their defence capabilities through acquisitions and indigenous production from various sources.¹⁵² Similar to political challenges, external influence comes into play in military issues. Russia, which once fought the Afghan Mujahideen (these fighters later adopted the name “Taliban”), had been accused by the West of arming the Taliban, albeit it was never proved.¹⁵³

5.1.5 *External*

5.1.5.1 *Evolving Geopolitical Realities*

The evolving geopolitical rivalry is another obstacle towards the integration of SAARC. Experts said that in the future, rivalries would increase since global dynamics are more uncertain and complex now than in previous times. Taking this complex phenomenon into account, countries make alliances with like-minded countries to preserve their national interests. India, for example, has become a trusted partner of the West and is now actively involved in various strategic initiatives. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the USA puts high emphasis on India as a counterbalance to

¹⁵⁰ Md Mahbub-ul Alam and Helal Uddin, “Navigating Challenges of Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Management and Its Strategic Solutions,” *Society & Sustainability* 7, no. 1 (2025): 32–43.

¹⁵¹ Alam and Uddin, “Navigating Challenges of Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Management”.

¹⁵² Sitara Noor, “Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan,” *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2023).

¹⁵³ “Russia, Taliban ‘laughed’ at US claims of Moscow arming fighters,” *Al Jazeera*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/30/russia-taliban-laughed-at-us-claims-of-moscow-arming-fighters>.

China's growing assertiveness in this part of the globe.¹⁵⁴ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising of the USA, Japan, Australia, and India, represents another significant regional initiative. At the Tokyo Summit in 2022, discussions centred on strategic approaches to regional security, including balancing China's growing influence.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the Western nations have been expanding defence cooperation with India, including increasing arms sales to enhance its strategic capabilities. There have also been proposals to position India as an alternative manufacturing hub, particularly in the semiconductor sector, reducing reliance on China. While these evolving partnerships offer economic and security advantages, they also contribute to shifting regional dynamics, potentially reinforcing divisions and complicating efforts toward greater cohesion within an already challenged regional bloc.

5.1.5.2 China's Presence and Its Interest in SAARC

Since its inception, SAARC has followed the rules of restricted membership and adhered to the principles of the United Nations (UN) Charter and the doctrine of non-alignment. This was observed when China showed its utmost interest in getting the full membership of SAARC. Although India supported Afghanistan's inclusion in SAARC, the country showed its reservations in adding China's membership. This reluctance and cautious approach by India reflected its concern of losing its influential role in South Asia by allowing the entry of another regional player.¹⁵⁶ On the contrary, Pakistan opposed Afghanistan's membership, taking into account the dispute over the Durand line, but strongly supported China's bid for full-fledged membership in various forums. From an expert interview, it was repeatedly informed that India-China relations are always complex and occasionally tense, and these are nowadays widening in the adjacent regions.¹⁵⁷ In the same line of thought, other experts also stated that India-China relations have historically been contentious and are currently becoming increasingly strained in adjacent regions. India does not view China's growing involvement in South Asia lightly, for example, the China-Pakistan

¹⁵⁴ Jan Hornat Jan, "Hegemonic stability in the Indo-Pacific: US-India relations and induced balancing," *International Relations* 37, no. 2 (2023): 324–347.

¹⁵⁵ Sebastian Maslow, "Japan's Geopolitics: Mapping a New Geopolitical Space in the Indo-Pacific," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 925–936.

¹⁵⁶ Ahmed, *Regionalism and regional security in South Asia*; Also, see, Z S Ahmed and M Zahoor, "Afghanistan in SAARC: A Critical Assessment of Organisational Expansion," *South Asian Survey* 22, no. 2 (2015): 171–188

¹⁵⁷ Assistant Professor, North South University, interview taken on March 27, 2024 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with grave concern, and has proposed its alternatives. Like those with Pakistan, random border skirmishes between India and China create unease among SAARC members as they depend on both.¹⁵⁸ From the mainland, their competition has expanded into the wider Indian Ocean, where militarisation is running in full force, and external powers have shifted their focus on it through different mechanisms.¹⁵⁹ Despite pledging nonalignment, most SAARC countries do not maintain that.

From the above discussion, it is evident that SAARC is currently confronted with a number of challenges. Now, the question is, should it be discontinued? Contrary to that, another query comes in: Since it has limited effectiveness, why are so many members interested in obtaining observer status? SAARC countries share a common history and culture, and their challenges have some commonalities. Poverty, hunger, climate change, terrorism, etc. all pose significant security threats for them. These shared challenges, however, have brought them closer. It is also worth mentioning that despite the divergent opinions about the inclusion of membership, SAARC does not confine its extent of activities; rather, it has widened its external linkages with an additional nine observers (comprising various entities) as of June 2017. This expansion shows that, although SAARC appears non-functional, it is an indispensable regional platform for South Asian countries. The next chapter is, thus, an endeavour to find out the probable strategies to make SAARC functional as a regional organisation.

¹⁵⁸ Assistant Professor, Department of IR, BUP, interview taken in March 28, 2024 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁵⁹ Manoj Kumar Mishra, "Regional Integration in South Asia," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 27, no. 1 (2023): 10–31.

Chapter 6

SAARC's Revival: Probable Paths

The feasibility of reviving SAARC has long been debated, given its historical shortcomings, prolonged dormancy, and limited prospects for reform. Concerns include the predominance of one member state, India, as well as the organisation's struggle to adapt to evolving regional and global dynamics. Additionally, ongoing political and economic challenges in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka further complicate SAARC's effectiveness. These factors have raised doubts on whether meaningful revitalisation is possible or if alternative regional frameworks may offer more viable solutions. Several sincere efforts to broaden mutual collaboration ended up fruitless like BBIN and SAFTA, which increasingly put the bloc into doubt. This Chapter elaborates on the probable paths of SAARC's revival based on findings from the KIIs and then attempts to integrate the information into the existing literature. An important component of this study is that it builds upon a previously established cohesive narrative on the necessary revival of SAARC and expands upon it with substantial, up-to-date data on the matter. The chapter argues that today's world is more complex than before; therefore, SAARC, being an important regional grouping, should be revived by various means.

6.1 Structural Level Solutions

6.1.1 *Change in the Mandates of SAARC*

It is realised that two specific problems in the SAARC mandate hamper the development of SAARC. First, unlike the UN Secretary-General, the SAARC Secretary General does not hold any special power. Second, any type of bilateral and political issue is kept outside SAARC's domain. By bringing change to these two issue areas, the activity of SAARC can be heightened. Since there are many ongoing bilateral disputes, SAARC can be a useful platform if the bilateral problems are solved. For example, even though many scholars feared an escalation of border tension between Bangladesh and India, those disputes have been reduced through discussions and negotiations over time. Likewise, SAARC can help member states to sit for negotiations. This includes India-Pakistan and other concerns as well.

Now, looking back to the European states, it can be said that they continue to agree because they have a common platform to solve their issues, which South Asian states do not have. Experts say that this is the reason why external powers have

been so dominant in the region. Thus, the change in the mandate can assist states in deterring external powers and their dominance. Additionally, the Secretary-General of the UN holds special powers such as Article 99, where they can bring the attention of the member states to any issue that seems to be threatening to internal peace and security. In addition to that, under Resolution 377(v), the Secretary-General could call a special session for the General Assembly in case the Security Council fails to reach a consensus on a matter. In the same way, the SAARC mandate can bestow special power for the Secretary General to solve threats and issues which might hamper the peace and stability of the region.

6.1.2 Informal Arrangements along with Bottom-up Approach

It is identified that SAARC, as a common platform, is hard to make functional without dialogue or consensus. Experts view that instead of a summit, small-scale initiatives can be taken at the G-2-G¹⁶⁰ level, such as activating budgetary meetings. In this case, the meetings with the SAARC's Secretary General can be held first to bridge the gap and make it cohesive. Following that, meetings can be arranged at the secretary and ministerial levels each year. Overall, the Foreign Ministry can play a pivotal role in this aspect. These layer-based initiatives can expedite SAARC initiatives. Members can be grouped into different sub-committees to address different issues based on priorities and interests. For example, littorals of the Bay of Bengal may work on ensuring the safety of the sea, for climate risks, work together but be grouped into different parts based on the threat level, same in the case of other non-traditional security threats as well.

Since SAARC is a state-centric initiative, it will be a more useful platform if grassroots initiatives are taken using this platform. This is because, quite often, a bottom-up approach is more fruitful and productive than the top-down approach, as said by the experts.¹⁶¹ In this regard, civil society engagement through supporting NGOs and community organisations can help immensely by promoting dialogues and cooperation in social sectors. To support the government, they can play a role in conflict resolution by organising an open dialogue.

¹⁶⁰ Government-to-government (G2G) initiatives refer to the exchange of data or information between two government departments or organisations, usually via electronic means.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Gehring and Kevin Urbanski, "Member-dominated international organizations as actors: a bottom-up theory of corporate agency," *International Theory* 15, no. 1 (2023): 129–153.

6.1.3 *Consensus-1 Formula for Promoting Positive Diplomacy*

SAARC is predominantly dependent on the consensus of member countries. Hence, it is an arduous task to pass any resolution or implement any decision if one member country denies the proposal. In that case, the consensus-1 formula can be worked to expedite the process. According to the Former Additional Secretary¹⁶²,

“The time has come when regional political issues that affect everybody must be brought under SAARC to further positive diplomacy”.

To bring that positive diplomacy, there is a path that SAARC members can follow. First, using common factors such as culture, border, and regional issues, they should initiate discussions on regional and global issues, then gradually bring bilateral concerns. Through bilateral meetings, heads of state can talk, and delegates can negotiate the conversations. This will contribute to regional growth because, without multilateral cooperation, states cannot achieve development. Hence, every bilateral meeting should be taken as an opportunity to further the agendas of SAARC. However, there is a need for considerable caution in this regard: the elements mentioned just earlier for promoting closer bilateral ties and cooperation are also those most prone to creating divides. History is regularly brought in or evoked for such purposes.

6.1.4 *Increased Budgetary Allocation*

No organisation can exist, let alone properly function, without a strong financial base. Poor budgetary allocation remains a stumbling block to taking large-scale initiatives. In this case, the budget needs to be increased in certain sectors based on priority. In various areas such as agricultural development, poverty alleviation, SDGs, and climate change, funding needs to be enhanced. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, this was not a major concern. However, after that, almost every state in South Asia has been going through economic issues, hence, the SDF should allocate a budget for the SAC to help them implement the programme and increase participation. Experts say that China, while being an observer member, can be a potential supplier of surplus funds and projects for tackling common challenges that SAARC member countries encounter. However, the projects need to be result-based and time-bound.

¹⁶² Former Additional Secretary, MoFA (BIMSTEC and SAARC), interviewed on May 29, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

6.2 Economic Level Solutions

6.2.1 Common Vision to Address Non-contentious Issues

There are some common issues that all South Asian countries are currently encountering. Terrorism, climate change, and natural disasters are common security threats that hamper economic stability. The recent flood on 24 August 2024 in Bangladesh's southern part indicates the urgent need for cooperation with upper riparian countries like India, with which Bangladesh shares common rivers. Hence, the members should work collectively on these newly emerging non-traditional security threats. After COP 29, big countries promised to give aid to the smaller states that are affected by the climate risks caused by them. According to a Former Additional Secretary of MoFA, "*Any issue can become a security concern*".¹⁶³ Hence, if these climate risks can be seen as a security concern against survival and economic threat, in case the big states do not adhere to their promise, the South Asian states can work together to ensure that the states are paying. Besides, with the growing importance of technology and the cybersecurity threats, SAARC states can cooperate on ICT issues, especially considering the surge of cybercrimes in the region. The ICT-related projects and aims (including regional connectivity through broadband, satellite links, and e-governance platforms) taken during the 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka in 2004 must be revisited and updated, and the plans must be made accordingly to follow the trends of recent times. Addressing this issue is urgent since a number of the member countries are experiencing a surge of cyberattacks. In India, for example, the reported cybercrimes increased dramatically from 5693 in 2014 to 50,035 in 2020.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, Ransomware incidents in Sri Lanka have been increasing in recent times. These threats are heightened due to the absence of a digital SAARC strategy, a poor regional cybersecurity network, and minimal joint research and training. Therefore, to mitigate these threats effectively and prepare a robust response mechanism, South Asian states should work together.

6.2.2 Following the Model of ASEAN

There are three pillars of ASEAN, which include political, social, and economic factors. For example, the ASEAN, on one hand, works on the Myanmar crisis, and on the other, develops economic ties among other member states of

¹⁶³ Former Additional Secretary, MoFA (BIMSTEC and SAARC), interviewed on May 29, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁶⁴ Megha Ojha and Rakhi Raturi, "Combating Cybercrime: A Study on Problems, Preventions and Cyber Laws of India," *European Economic Letters* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1606, <https://doi.org/10.52783/eel.v14i1.1220>.

SAARC. Similarly, SAARC states can do that. They can implement “best practices” of social, political, and economic factors to build capacity and resilience among SAARC members. If the issues are divided into three different categories, meaning discussing political concerns and issues under a political umbrella, one factor will not hamper the other. For example, if political problems arise, that will not affect economic or social factors. The example can be taken from the cases of China and India that, despite differing ideologies and vying for influence over the Indian Ocean region, both states are engaged in economic and trade relations. However, this needs to be done gradually, as changes cannot happen overnight.

6.2.3 *Emphasising Skilled Manpower*

Every country wants to promote its national interest. On the economic front, SAARC has the potential to play a bigger role. To reap the full economic potential, a skilled workforce is necessary. One such area, South Asian states, has a huge population that can be turned into human assets. In the past, workers chose the Middle East, the USA, and other Western states as their key destinations. However, most of the people who went abroad were not skilled. In addition, due to the natives losing their jobs, migrant workers’ acceptance rate is declining due to reduction of overall numbers of skilled migrant workers. This means that if the population is skilled, the chances of migration will rise. Hence, states can work together to turn the unemployed population into skilled workers and gain economic benefits from it. Given the monumental changes taking place in regional and global economic situations, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak, Russo-Ukrainian and Israel-Hamas wars, the rise-growth-spread of conservatism, xenophobia, and right-wing populism resulting in deep chaos, SAARC members must go for wider economic diversification and not rely only on manpower export. Bangladeshi¹⁶⁵ and Pakistani¹⁶⁶ migrant workers have earned a bad name in various countries for their misdeeds, such as illegal entry and work, visa overstay, and trying to illegally enter other countries, which in several cases pose a grave danger for further recruitment. India already has a huge, diversified economy and is trying to emerge as a hub for semiconductor manufacturing in light of the Taiwan crisis. Although other SAARC members are not so developed still to

¹⁶⁵ S M Solaiman, “Fighting Against Black Money by Offering Amnesty for Economic Development in Bangladesh: A Stigma Can Never Be a Beauty Spot,” *University of Miami International & Comparative Law Review* 29, no. 1 (2021): 42.

¹⁶⁶ Abdullah Khoso, “Social Machinery and Violence in the Process of Pakistani Migrant Workers’ Migration from Pakistan to Malaysia,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Problems* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), 1–23.

pursue such endeavours, they may try to focus on different sectors which have broader demand.

6.2.4 *Setting Economic Agenda*

SAARC needs to set up a comprehensive economic agenda for mutual benefits, and to accomplish that, the first and foremost initiative is to convene SAARC summits, which have been stalled for a decade. Besides, sufficient initiatives need to be taken for signing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), developing regional value chains, and liberalising visa policies to bring positive impacts on trade and services. Certain economic arrangements like cross-border trade and the implementation of comprehensive trade agreements should be materialised. SAARC countries even need to be prepared for e-commerce and digital technology to harness the full potential of trade. According to a Scholar from CPD¹⁶⁷,

“If SAARC states can prioritise economic benefits keeping political tensions aside, various co-operation could happen among states which will lead to the welfare of the people and economy”.

Hence, SAARC needs to establish an economic vision, as a political vision is not possible due to tensions between states. In addition, the ascendancy of economic vision will help create political issues positively. When states undergo economic transformations and achieve mutual benefits where their economies bloom, it becomes easier to keep aside other issues. The EU is an example of that. The SAARC member states can use this method as well to ensure their economic stability and prosperity.

6.3 **Political Issues**

6.3.1 *Overcoming Political Deadlock*

Political deadlock has been a major hindrance to making SAARC effective. Geopolitical tensions, divergent national interests, bureaucratic hurdles, and limited implementation capacity often lead to a lack of cooperation among the SAARC countries. In this aspect, the role of India is crucial. For example, India and Pakistan are the two major players who need to show their constructive approach to making SAARC functional. Regrettably, the ongoing blame games between the two countries are still prevalent. The recent Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025 and the subsequent military escalations between India and Pakistan have once again demonstrated how

¹⁶⁷ Executive Director, CPD, interviewed on May 21, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

bilateral hostilities directly impact regional cooperation. The cancellation of planned backchannel diplomacy and stalling of multilateral engagements following the conflict¹⁶⁸ illustrate how quickly tensions can derail even minimal SAARC progress. In this regard, a Professor from DU commented¹⁶⁹,

“In both domestic and international politics, Pakistan and India perceive each other through a lens of longstanding differences. Unless the political deadlock is overcome, SAARC will not be functional. In this aspect, being the regional player, India must pursue a constructive approach and contribute positively to regional cooperation.”

Similar to the above observation, other scholars across South Asian countries also opined that to make SAARC vibrant, India must show its genuine intention and an idealistic perspective. Highlighting the issue of political deadlock, an expert from Nepal stated¹⁷⁰,

“India is the largest country and the largest economy in South Asia and has a disproportionate responsibility for the success or the failure of SAARC. After the last Summit held in Kathmandu, the organisation has not had a Summit. It is mainly due to Indo-Pak tensions affecting the spirit of cooperation in the region. Nepal and Bangladesh, being the pioneers who mooted the idea of SAARC, need to be proactive in pressuring India and Pakistan that there is no alternative to SAARC in South Asia. If SAARC is defunct, we need to set up another similar organisation”.

Echoing this point, a Sri Lankan scholar said¹⁷¹,

“India’s stance on its relationship with Pakistan, in particular, influences the overall effectiveness of SAARC. While India is committed to the SAARC process, its concerns over Pakistan have contributed to the stagnation of summits and cooperation initiatives. Furthermore, India’s engagement in other regional groupings, like BIMSTEC, has raised concerns about SAARC’s relevance, although

¹⁶⁸ Iram Abid and Taimoor Akbar Chaudhury, “India-Pakistan Relations after the Revocation of Article 370: A Diplomatic Deadlock,” *ASSAJ* 3, no. 2 (2025): 565–574.

¹⁶⁹ Professor, Department of Political Science, DU, interviewed on September 08, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁷⁰ Director, Centre for South Asian Studies, Nepal, interviewed on August 29, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁷¹ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadigamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, interviewed on September 09, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

these organisations can complement rather than compete with each other. India's full commitment to SAARC is necessary for its revitalisation..."

The 2025 escalation underscores the urgency of creating conflict-resolution mechanisms within SAARC that are not held hostage to India-Pakistan bilateralism. Without such insulation, even non-traditional and humanitarian regional initiatives will remain paralysed by political inertia. These observations indicate that a concerted effort from all other members is required to enhance diplomatic engagements.

6.3.2 Engaging China and Observers in Various Development Projects

As discussed, funding shortage has been a significant concern for implementing development projects under SAARC. Therefore, increasing engagement with China and observers in various development projects can be a viable path for SAARC's revival. Apart from China, the observers (the EU and other economically advanced countries such as Japan, South Korea, the USA, and Australia) as well as some other countries like Russia and Turkey which are showing interest in joining this regional framework, can be taken into consideration with utmost importance for furthering economic collaboration. Although the observers have limited participation in SAARC ministerial meetings, they can work as 'game changers' for the revitalisation of SAARC through more involved and active involvement. Thus, the existing members should seize this opportunity and can leverage the potential of trade and investment and advance SDGs and overall social development.

It has already been observed that in the case of China, it has a substantial presence in all countries of South Asia, notably in the development and infrastructure sectors (which include roads, ports, bridges, etc.). The country once even sought full membership in SAARC since it shares borders with five South Asian countries.¹⁷² The importance of China in SAARC has been growing in recent times because of geo-strategic reasons. As remarked by a Former high official of MoFA of Bangladesh.¹⁷³

"China has a vested interest in SAARC. China believes in the idea of regional cooperation under the broader vision of 'Asia for Asians'. China wants to see less external influence in Asian affairs".

¹⁷² "Beijing sets eyes on SAARC membership," *The Deccan Herald*, September 19, 2014.

¹⁷³ Former Secretary and Ambassador of Bangladesh to China, interview taken on May 30, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Thus, China is also exploring more options to enhance relations with the South Asian states that are conducive and will enable it to create a positive atmosphere. Although in the 18th SAARC Summit in 2014, a greater role for observers was discussed, it has not been implemented so far. However, considering the current context, project-based cooperation in major areas can be taken into account for deeper engagement by the observers in the region. There is a need for more result-based and time-bound projects to enhance cooperation, as remarked by the Secretary General of SAARC in a Round Table discussion held in Sri Lanka.¹⁷⁴

6.3.3 Reducing Trust Deficit

Integration of a region does not happen within days or months, but rather takes years or decades; the process is complex and may even be expensive, as many members may have to make certain concessions. As opined by an Economist from Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD),¹⁷⁵

“Maybe it will take time, but I am hopeful for the future. However, what SAARC can do for the time being is focus on ‘issue-specific solutions’”.

For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, upon being called by PM Narendra Modi, South Asian states sat informally to decide on how to fight the pandemic together. Afghanistan and Pakistan were not only present but also shared their suggestions with others, which showed a new spirit among South Asian states to work together. This reflects the fact that if they work against a common threat, they will be willing to work together for common interests too. In the current scenario, many issues need collaborative efforts to solve. For example, traditional threats such as border breaches and external influence and non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, trafficking, smuggling, climate change, and others. To revive SAARC, member states can address the most pressing issue and try to find a solution. This method will help build trust among them and gradually lead to a revival of SAARC.

¹⁷⁴ Md Golam Sarwar, remarks at Roundtable Discussion at BIISS; Lakshman Kadirkamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI), Colombo, interviewed on June 13, 2024.

¹⁷⁵ Executive Director, CPD, interviewed on May 21, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

6.4 Cultural Cooperation

6.4.1 *Cultural Integration*

Closer cultural ties and people-to-people connections are needed among members as they share a common history. However, the dominance of Western culture has brought a lot of changes to this region. Emphasising the youth cohort, a scholar from CPD states¹⁷⁶, “*Closer cultural ties can be created among the new generation*”. To preserve cultural history, pass on priceless information about culture, shape intergenerational connections, celebrate diversity, foster identity, encourage well-being, and finally build a sustainable future, the new generation should be guided towards traditional knowledge and customs. To achieve that, a regional sense of cultural unity needs to be established. For instance, Bamiyan, a Buddhist site in Afghanistan, was announced as the SAARC Cultural Capital in 2015. The SAARC Cultural Centre has played a role in furthering these ties and bonding among member states. Through this centre, cultural exchange programmes can be arranged to promote cultural understanding. Organising art exhibitions, music festivals, and literary events will be helpful and will connect South Asian members. Likewise, several initiatives can be taken to cherish the shared culture and transpose the beauty of culture, surpassing the national boundary. With the SAARC Youth Charter, interaction can be promoted by taking cultural and educational projects.

There is a necessity of promoting education first as literacy rates in these countries are not satisfactory yet. While India and Sri Lanka rank high in this regard, others are lacking. For example, in Bangladesh, people who can only read and write qualify as literate. But that approach is pretty much outdated, miserable, and therefore needs extensive modification. Nowadays, a significant number of Indian students come to Bangladesh and vice versa, and this exchange should be expedited and continued. Besides, language is a vital tool for promoting cultural cooperation. Being a British dominion formerly, albeit English is widely used, other regional languages should be taught to broaden cultural cooperation. Few, if anyone at all, in Bangladesh, Nepal, or Pakistan will understand the Tamil or Dhivehi (Maldives) and, for that matter, Pashto, Dari, or Tajik languages (Afghanistan). If one cannot understand what others speak or write, communication barriers will sustain in promoting cultural ties. This also applies to understanding, preserving, and promoting the culture of local communities, not only those of the mainstream or the elite in all member countries.

¹⁷⁶ Executive Director, CPD, interviewed on May 21, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

6.4.2 *Enhance People-to-People Connectivity*

SAARC countries have various problems at political levels. To resolve those issues, cooperation can be intensified at the TRACK II level rather than solely depending on the TRACK I level mechanisms. If the private sector is in operation, SAARC countries will receive benefits since the informal connection is expected to increase trade, tourism, and cultural connectivity. To learn from each other, information, communication, and technology (ICT) sectors need to be strengthened. As mentioned previously, accessing a visa is a crucial barrier to promoting tourism, which has been frequently seen between Bangladesh and India in the case of medical tourism. As remarked by an Indian expert from IDSA, in this aspect,¹⁷⁷

“People-to-people contact is fundamental to every country’s foreign policy. Bangladesh receives the largest number of visas, reflecting the level of contact. The power is transferred to Bangladesh. If the fundamentals of foreign policy are people, then I don’t see any change. Moreover, this relationship is detected by geography. The map of the two countries determines the interdependent relationship.”

In light of this, it needs to be suggested that the visa process should be relaxed for easy movement of people across the region. Besides, improving cross-border facilities, focusing on economic corridors, scholarships, media collaborations, sports, and youth engagement, joint celebration of common history, SAARC festivals, and other regular events are necessary to increase connectivity at the grassroots level. Enhanced online or in-person interaction (facilitated through podcasts engaging students, teachers, scholars, and journalists) among different segments of South Asian countries will be imperative. Historical animosity can be reduced through the establishment of research centres, collaborative research initiatives, and appreciation of each other’s heritage through joint cultural festivals, art exhibitions, music concerts, film screenings, etc. By implementing these strategies, South Asian members can bolster significant people-to-people connectivity, fostering greater understanding, cooperation, and peaceful relations amidst the evolving political landscape.

Investing in the education sector through scholarships, student exchange programmes, and collaborative research projects between universities will help to

¹⁷⁷ Research Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (MP-IDSA), India, interviewed on September 08, 2024.

establish connections with the younger generations. Leveraging social media and digital platforms can be used to connect people, share stories, and understand cross-cultural ties. Business and trade partnerships facilitate collaborations between entrepreneurs, businesses, and industries to build economic ties. Tourism and travel can help to strengthen people-to-people connectivity. For these cultural tours, homestay programmes can be arranged to foster personal connections. Finally, the involvement of the diaspora can be increased by making a connection with other diaspora communities and leveraging their networks and expertise.

In the end, it can be stated that finding out areas of cooperation in SAARC through more focused investigations is important in realising the complexities of the current world order. Because many common issues cannot be resolved bilaterally, rather, a common platform is needed. Considering geographical and historical realities, addressing energy crises, food insecurity, climate change, and other common crises is not possible to address at the state level. Rather, regional cooperation can be a probable path to address these issues. Even though SAARC is not working in every sector, there are areas where members are still active. By discovering the areas of activities and issues that have potential, SAARC can be revived.

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusion

SAARC was founded with the hope of increasing regional cooperation, fostering development, and improving bi- and multilateral harmonious ties among its member states. Nearly 40 years have passed since its inception, yet only a few of these ambitious goals have been achieved so far. Various factors have contributed to this lack of progress. Among these, the shifting priorities and leanings of countries, often driven by domestic political agendas, further hinder the cohesive efforts needed for regional integration. Foreign intervention is another critical factor impeding SAARC's progress. External powers have historically influenced the region, sometimes aligning with specific members to further their strategic interests, thereby complicating intra-regional dynamics. Mutual animosity among member states, especially the long-standing hostility between India and Pakistan, has also played a significant role in installing SAARC's initiatives. This animosity often spills over into regional forums, preventing consensus on crucial issues and stalling the decision-making process. The pertinent question now is: What does the future hold for SAARC? The following section has briefly overviewed various pertinent details about the future of this organisation.

7.1 Future of SAARC

Indeed, the future of SAARC depends on several pertinent issues. For example, India, being the most prominent actor in SAARC in terms of economy, landmass, military power, technological strength, human development, and global stature, wields considerable influence within the organisation. It is, therefore, obvious that other member states often struggle in their interactions with India. This struggle is evident even in scenarios where India grants them convenient market access or signs FTAs. Despite these concessions, other members find it challenging to compete with India due to its huge, diversified, and far more advanced economic structure. The disparity in economic development between India and other SAARC countries creates a scenario where smaller economies feel overshadowed and unable to leverage the benefits of regional cooperation fully.

Furthermore, absence of strong, impartial, and effective leadership within SAARC has often led to a lack of direction and momentum in its initiatives. Dominance of nationalistic and protectionist policies over regional cooperation principles has further contributed to the organisation's stagnation. Additionally,

bureaucratic inefficiencies and slow pace of implementing agreed-upon measures rendered many of SAARC's ambitious plans ineffective.

Mutual hostilities in South Asia, nowadays, extend beyond the traditional Indo-Pak dimension and include Afghanistan, China, and other extra-regional powers. Although the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan continues to be a significant point of contention, other geopolitical tensions are increasingly coming to the fore. South Asian countries share a common history, which could have been a unifying factor in fostering regional cooperation. However, this shared history is often used to highlight divisions rather than build bridges, and SAARC has been unable to mend these rifts. The historical and cultural commonalities, which should ideally serve as a foundation for unity, have instead become tools for deepening regional divides. The recent Pahalgam attack in April 2025 and the military confrontation that followed have further entrenched this fragmentation,¹⁷⁸ proving once again how bilateral conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan, can bring regional cooperation to a standstill. The diplomatic and military fallout not only derailed backchannel peace efforts but also reaffirmed the perception that SAARC is structurally incapable of withstanding shocks caused by its two largest members.

Moreover, there has been a noticeable growth of sub-regionalism within SAARC, with certain initiatives deliberately excluding Pakistan. For instance, the SASEC, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, is one such enterprise. Similarly, the BBIN-MVA, as mentioned earlier, is another example of sub-regional cooperation that bypasses Pakistan. These highlight a trend where member states seek to collaborate outside the SAARC framework, often excluding Pakistan, thereby undermining the inclusive vision of SAARC. India's current focus on partnerships with Southeast Asia under its "Act East" policy further illustrates this shift. India's greater involvement with the BIMSTEC underscores its strategic pivot. India is developing significant connectivity projects with Southeast Asian members of this group, such as the Kaladan Road Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Notably, none of these ventures includes Pakistan, reflecting a strategic realignment that prioritises engagement with Southeast Asia over fostering cooperation within SAARC.

These developments point to a deeper issue: while SAARC's stated goal is to promote regional cooperation, exclusion of key members from significant sub-regional initiatives only serves to deepen suspicions and mistrust. Fragmentation within SAARC and rise of sub-regional groupings underscores the challenges the

¹⁷⁸ Abid and Chaudhury, "India-Pakistan Relations After".

organisation faces in achieving its objectives. Such practices undermine the spirit of regional unity and cooperation that SAARC was designed to promote. They also contribute to a geopolitical landscape marked by increased suspicion and rivalry rather than mutual understanding and collaboration.

The SAARC Charter has not been updated so far, despite momentous changes taking place worldwide and in the region. This lack of updates reflects a significant gap between the organisation's foundational principles and the current geopolitical and socio-economic realities. The failure to revise and adapt the Charter to contemporary challenges and opportunities underscores a critical shortcoming in SAARC's approach to regional cooperation. Additionally, the enduring Indo-Pak rivalry has effectively stalled SAARC summits, with the last summit being held in 2014. This ongoing conflict has been a major setback as it has deprived the member states of a vital platform for dialogue and negotiation on both cooperative and contentious issues. Without regular summits, SAARC has struggled to maintain momentum and address pressing regional concerns.

Interestingly, no SAARC country is a member of any formal military or political alliance led by major global powers. Yet, some of them express implicit or explicit support for the policies of these global powers. These dynamics raise reciprocal misgivings among themselves, fostering an environment of suspicion and distrust. The perceived alignment of certain members with external powers often leads to accusations of playing into their hands, further complicating intra-regional relations. This atmosphere of mutual suspicion hinders sincere and constructive engagement within SAARC, limiting the organisation's ability to function effectively. Few members demonstrate a true willingness to revive and strengthen SAARC. When the actors within a group lack interest or sincerity regarding its advancement, and when major players are preoccupied with historical animosities and conflicts, progress becomes exceedingly difficult.

This disinterest and preoccupation with past grievances, nonetheless, have been particularly detrimental to SAARC. The organisation has become a painful instance of this harsh reality, where regional cooperation and development are stymied by enduring rivalries and a lack of genuine commitment. SAARC's inability to adapt its Charter, coupled with the persistent Indo-Pak rivalry and the influence of external global powers, has created a complex and challenging environment for regional cooperation. Lack of summits and formal platforms for dialogue has exacerbated these issues, leaving the organisation in a state of stagnation. The member states' implicit alliances with global powers further complicate intra-regional dynamics, fostering an environment of suspicion and mistrust. In such a context, the

revival and advancement of SAARC appear to be an uphill battle, requiring a fundamental shift in the attitudes and commitments of its member states. About the concerted effort of member states, a Sri Lankan scholar remarked,¹⁷⁹

“I believe that the current challenges faced by SAARC are mainly due to the issues between India and Pakistan. Of course, while it is clear that reviving SAARC necessitates dialogue between these two members, I do not think the responsibility of reviving the organisation should be put entirely on one member. The issues between India and Pakistan are long-running and multifaceted. However, it is noteworthy that the organisation and other member states should also do their best to ensure the continuity of SAARC considering the importance of the organisation”.

Notwithstanding various hurdles, there is barely any area where cooperation cannot be undertaken through SAARC. This regional organisation offers ample opportunities ranging from agriculture to trade. The breadth of potential cooperation within SAARC is vast, encompassing critical sectors such as health, education, technology, and environmental conservation. As suggested by a Sri Lankan scholar,¹⁸⁰

“Given the current political landscape of the region, SAARC should adhere to an issue-oriented model of operation that comprises the challenges that affect the region as much as possible, such as pandemics, climate change, security and trade as these are issues that affect communities across South Asia and each member has a vested interest in mitigating them”.

Hence, these areas of cooperation provide member states with platforms to address common challenges, share best practices, and leverage collective strengths for mutual benefit. The agricultural sector, for instance, presents opportunities for collaborative research, development of sustainable farming practices, and food security initiatives. Similarly, in the realm of trade, SAARC can facilitate the

¹⁷⁹ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview, interviewed on September 09, 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview, interviewed on September 09, 2024.

reduction of trade barriers, harmonisation of standards, and promotion of intra-regional commerce, thereby enhancing economic interdependence and growth among its member states.

“SAARC will never be abolished, and the major powers never want to abolish it” this remark by a professor of DU¹⁸¹ reflects the underlying geopolitical dynamics within the region. India, being the largest and most influential member, sees SAARC as a platform to assert its regional hegemony. As said by an official from the government,

“If you want to engage in conflict or cooperation, you need a space, and SAARC offers that sort of platform. Therefore, major powers, considering their strategic values, will keep SAARC alive to advance their regional interests. This has been witnessed over the past few years”.

This perspective highlights SAARC’s strategic importance to major powers, not just as a mechanism for regional cooperation but also as a means to maintain their influence within South Asia. By keeping SAARC alive, India ensures that it remains a central player in regional dialogues and negotiations, using the organisation as a vehicle to advance its interests and manage regional dynamics. In reality, this has been witnessed for the last couple of years. India’s engagement with SAARC has often reflected its aspiration to take on a leadership role within the organisation while seeking to address regional challenges through its framework. This strategic utilisation of SAARC allows India to navigate its complex relationships with neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan, within a structured and multilateral framework. Despite the challenges and occasional stagnation in SAARC’s progress, India’s commitment to keeping the organisation operational underscores its recognition of SAARC’s value in regional geopolitics. The continued existence of SAARC serves as a testament to the enduring need for a regional platform where member states can engage, negotiate, and address both cooperative and contentious issues. As remarked by a Sri Lankan Scholar¹⁸²,

“SAARC needs to avoid centring its operations in a particular member state, and instead think of focusing on common platforms as much as possible. There are a considerable number of international organisations with members that disagree with each

¹⁸¹ Professor, Department of Political Science, interviewed on September 06, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹⁸² Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview, interviewed on 08 September 08, 2024.

other yet come together to work as a united organisation to protect a common regional interest. By adopting a structure as such, SAARC could avoid bilateral issues among the affected members and disagreements from hindering the organisation's progress and, subsequently, the progression of other member states through the organisation”.

In contemporary times, various regional and subregional groupings (e.g., BIMSTEC, SAGQ) are affecting South Asian countries. Despite that deeper engagement, experts contended that perhaps these regional platforms can have a significant role to play, but they cannot fully complement or replace SAARC. As said by a journalist working closely on topics concerning regional and international organisations,

*“SAARC is the only way ahead. BIMSTEC cannot be an alternative. It can at best be a complement to SAARC”.*¹⁸³

This is because the countries of SAARC are mutually interdependent and addressing some of the problems, such as climate change, food and energy security, needs concerted efforts. Therefore, to make this regional grouping functional, each country has to actively participate and contribute to shared concerns.

7.2 What Role Can Bangladesh Play for SAARC’s Revival?

The current interim regime of Bangladesh has demonstrated a clear willingness to play an active role in SAARC’s revival, reflecting its commitment to regional cooperation and stability. Bangladesh has long been a vocal supporter of SAARC’s objectives, and the interim government’s stance remains aligned with the country’s historical advocacy for greater regional integration. In the face of economic challenges and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the regime recognises that revitalising SAARC could foster economic growth, enhance connectivity, and strengthen political stability in the region. Bangladesh’s strategic position in South Asia places it in an advantageous role to act as a bridge between conflicting interests within SAARC, including facilitating dialogue between India and Pakistan, two major stakeholders whose strained relations have impeded SAARC’s progress. Furthermore, the interim government’s emphasis on promoting peace and stability through diplomacy and the framework of SAARC closely aligns with SAARC’s long-term goals. The regime’s willingness to engage in regional projects, promote trade facilitation, and push for non-contentious issues such as climate change and poverty alleviation signals its

¹⁸³ “SAARC may seem dead, but we should not bury it quite yet,” *Dhaka Tribune*, November 27, 2022.

proactive approach to SAARC's revival. However, the political sensitivity surrounding Bangladesh's domestic landscape also shapes how far the interim government can push forward its agenda for SAARC, given its current internal focus on managing transitions and maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Nevertheless, Bangladesh remains poised to contribute meaningfully to SAARC's resurgence through diplomatic leadership, economic cooperation, and cultural initiatives.

Bangladesh is a forerunner of this organisation; hence, Bangladesh can be a significant actor in reviving SAARC. The history of SAARC goes further back because it was Bangladesh's brainchild; hence, reviving SAARC is more than a development policy for the country. Even though Bangladesh works closely with India, it also wants to cooperate further with other South Asian states for collective development. This is why Bangladesh initiated the formation of SAARC, and the First Summit was held in Dhaka. Before that, the South Asian states had no other regional institutions. This reflects upon the fact that now that SAARC's activities are stagnant, the role of Bangladesh can impact the reviving process. To expedite the revitalisation process, Bangladesh should take a serious stake, and this has been reflected in the interventions from the experts interviewed. As remarked by an Air Vice Marshal,¹⁸⁴

“It was Bangladesh which mooted the idea of SAARC in the first place, and that was the animating spirit behind it. And we owe it to SAARC’s progenitors to therefore take the lead in its revival”.

To revive SAARC, the main steps should be taken to mitigate the core challenges. Rivalry between India and Pakistan, lack of consensus, and summits not taking place are some of the core issues that are hindering the efforts of reviving SAARC. However, Bangladesh is capable of playing a role in these issues. Since the independence of Bangladesh, the country has rather consistently maintained good relations with India. To arrest the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) members hiding in Bangladesh, India even cooperated with Bangladesh in security aspects.¹⁸⁵ In addition, both states are littorals of the Bay of Bengal. Hence, if Bangladesh wants to revive the activities of SAARC, it can arrange meetings by using the same model as the Arab states. For example, the Arab states also have problems with each other, but when they become members of a sub-committee, in the presence of delegates and observers, they participate in diplomatic dialogues. Even in the model of SAARC, depending on the needs of the states, they form sub-committees to work on different

¹⁸⁴ “Saarc may seem dead,” *Dhaka Tribune*.

¹⁸⁵ Dixita Deka, “Living without closure: memories of counter-insurgency and secret killings in Assam,” *Asian Ethnicity* 22, no. 3 (2021): 428–446.

projects, as stated in the SAC projects. If Bangladesh can formulate a committee under SAARC to address issues relevant to the region, it can bring India and Pakistan on board. The dialogues do not need to be among heads of the state only; the dedicated committee can sit for negotiations as well.

Bangladesh is a pioneer of this organisation, thereby showing a vested interest in reviving SAARC. As remarked by an academic of DU,¹⁸⁶

“Now, SAARC is approaching its 40th year. It cannot be denied that Bangladesh has a unique position in South Asia because of SAARC. Consequently, Bangladesh must consider those factors that hinder SAARC’s efficacy. A significant step is perhaps engaging Pakistan while being mindful of delicate issues. While not a traditional political ally, Pakistan might be approached as a strategic diplomatic partner in a manner akin to the relationship between Israel-Germany who mainly emphasised mutual interests and regional tranquillity for the long run. If Bangladesh stops pursuing, nothing will ultimately work; rather, it stalls overall progress”.

This statement underscores the significant role that Bangladesh has played and continues to play within the framework of SAARC. As one of the founding members, Bangladesh has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the ideals and objectives of SAARC. The country’s unique position in South Asia is a testament to its proactive stance and sustained efforts to foster regional cooperation and development through this regional organisation. Consequently, Bangladesh must consider those factors that hinder SAARC’s efficacy. A significant step in this direction would be engaging Pakistan while being mindful of delicate issues. Engaging with Pakistan, despite the historical and political complexities, is crucial for revitalising SAARC. While Pakistan is not strictly a political ally to Bangladesh, it can nevertheless be approached as a diplomatic partner akin to the existing Israel-Germany relationship, where historical animosities have been set aside to forge a pragmatic and mutually beneficial partnership. If Bangladesh stops pursuing such diplomatic engagements, nothing will ultimately work, and the overall progress of SAARC will stall. This highlights the importance of continuous and earnest efforts from Bangladesh to bridge gaps and foster collaboration among SAARC member states.

Realistically, maintaining a neutral position will empower Bangladesh, and inevitably, it can have a significant influence. By adopting a neutral and balanced

¹⁸⁶ Professor, Department of Political Science, DU, interviewed on September 06, 2024, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

approach, Bangladesh can position itself as a mediator and facilitator of dialogue within SAARC. This neutrality will enable Bangladesh to navigate the complex political dynamics of the region and promote a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding. Furthermore, Bangladesh can play a pivotal role in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by the region. Initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and sustainable development can be spearheaded by Bangladesh to showcase the potential of SAARC to improve the quality of life for its people. Additionally, Bangladesh's experience in disaster management and climate resilience can be leveraged to promote regional cooperation in addressing environmental challenges. The experts interviewed from different countries also agreed to work on these non-traditional security issues. By taking a lead in these areas, Bangladesh can set a positive example and inspire other member states to actively participate in SAARC's initiatives.

From Bangladesh's side, certain initiatives can be prioritised, for example, bolstering the private sector to stimulate trade and investment. In this aspect, strengthening the private sector is essential for enhancing economic interdependence and fostering regional economic integration. By promoting trade and investment through this sector, Bangladesh can contribute to the economic growth of the region and demonstrate the tangible benefits of regional cooperation through SAARC. Bangladesh's foundational role in the establishment of SAARC underscores its unique position and interest in revitalising the organisation. As SAARC approaches its 40th year, the relevance and effectiveness of the organisation remain crucial. Bangladesh, having been a key architect of SAARC's creation, continues to hold a pivotal role in shaping its future trajectory. This vested interest is reflected in the nation's strategic position within South Asia and its longstanding commitment to regional cooperation.

This analogy underscores the potential for Bangladesh to mediate and foster dialogue, creating an environment conducive to cooperation rather than conflict. By adopting a stance that balances neutrality with strategic diplomacy, Bangladesh can enhance its influence and facilitate dialogue among member states. Furthermore, this perspective emphasises that if Bangladesh ceases its efforts, the prospects for SAARC's revival will be significantly diminished. The absence of proactive engagement from Bangladesh could result in a stagnation of progress, thereby impeding any substantial advancements in regional cooperation. Bangladesh must continue to champion SAARC's cause, leveraging its diplomatic, economic, and political capital to break through the stalemates that have long plagued the organisation.

Taking into account the evolving political landscape in Bangladesh, the country can focus on certain initiatives, such as organising cultural exchange events, increasing academic collaborations, and initiating youth programmes that can be prioritised. To enhance cultural connectivity, Bangladesh can take proactive steps towards formal recognition and appreciation of the cultural assets of other SAARC member countries. For instance, while India has a strong presence in the book trade and other cultural markets in Bangladesh, there is minimal trade and cultural exchange with countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka. Increasing cultural trade and engagement with these countries can help build a more interconnected and inter-cultural community within the region. Emphasising Track II diplomacy, which involves non-governmental, informal, and people-to-people interaction, can facilitate deeper cultural exchanges and mutual understanding beyond formal governmental interactions. This approach can lead to more sustainable and meaningful connections among the people of SAARC member states.

Trade and economic integration are other critical areas where Bangladesh can lead efforts within SAARC. SAFTA remains one of the major agreements under SAARC that Bangladesh benefits from significantly. By actively participating in and advocating for the reduction of trade barriers and the enhancement of trade facilitation measures under SAFTA, Bangladesh can help increase intra-regional trade. This will not only boost its economy but also contribute to the overall economic integration of South Asia. Additionally, Bangladesh can champion initiatives aimed at improving regional connectivity through infrastructure development, such as road, rail, and port projects. These initiatives can enhance the physical and economic connectivity of the region, making it easier for goods, services, and people to move across borders.

Furthermore, Bangladesh can leverage its role to promote greater cooperation in non-traditional security areas such as climate change adaptation and disaster management. Given the region's vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, Bangladesh can spearhead collaborative efforts to develop regional strategies and frameworks to address these challenges. This can include joint research initiatives, shared resources for disaster response, and regional forums for knowledge exchange on best practices in climate resilience, and Bangladesh's role in the revival of SAARC is thus multifaceted and critical. By focusing on promoting medical and eco-tourism, enhancing cultural connectivity, leveraging SAFTA for trade benefits, and championing regional cooperation in non-traditional security areas, Bangladesh can help reinvigorate SAARC. These efforts will not only strengthen regional integration and cooperation but also ensure that SAARC remains a relevant and effective platform for addressing the shared challenges and opportunities of South Asia.

In conclusion, it can be argued that SAARC was established with the noble vision of fostering regional cooperation, promoting development, and enhancing harmonious relations among its member states. Nearly four decades later, this vision remains largely unfulfilled due to a myriad of challenges, including power asymmetry, lack of sincere commitment from policymakers, shifting domestic priorities, and external interventions. The enduring Indo-Pak tensions has particularly stymied progress, often overshadowing the potential for collective growth and cooperation. Despite India's significant influence within the organisation, the disparities in economic development and political clout among member states have created an environment of imbalance and mistrust. The absence of effective leadership, coupled with nationalistic policies and bureaucratic inefficiencies, has further impeded SAARC's ability to achieve its objectives. The rise of sub-regionalism and India's strategic pivot towards Southeast Asia underscore the shifting dynamics within the region, often at the expense of inclusive regional cooperation. The outdated SAARC Charter and the lack of regular summits highlight the organisation's struggle to adapt to contemporary challenges. Amidst this complex landscape, Bangladesh's foundational role and vested interest in SAARC's revival are critical. By maintaining a neutral stance and engaging in strategic diplomacy, Bangladesh can play a pivotal role in bridging gaps and fostering dialogue. In the present context, revitalising SAARC thus requires a renewed commitment to its objectives, with member states agreeing to prioritise the organisation over alternative frameworks when addressing regional challenges. To move forward, SAARC must adopt a more inclusive and adaptive approach, focusing on areas where collective action can yield tangible benefits, such as climate change, trade facilitation, and public health. Strengthening SAARC's institutional mechanisms to minimise duplication of efforts and aligning its agenda with the shifting priorities of its members will be critical to ensuring its relevance and impact in the region.

Initiatives to bolster the private sector, promote trade and investment, and enhance regional connectivity are essential for economic integration. Furthermore, Bangladesh's leadership in addressing socio-economic challenges, such as poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and environmental conservation, can set a positive example for other member states. Promoting medical and eco-tourism, enhancing cultural connectivity, and leveraging SAFTA for trade benefits are additional avenues through which Bangladesh can contribute to SAARC's revival. By championing cooperation in non-traditional security areas like climate change adaptation, disaster management, and public health, Bangladesh can help SAARC remain a relevant platform for addressing shared regional challenges. Ultimately, the revival and advancement of SAARC hinges on the collective commitment of its member states to

transcend historical animosities and nationalistic agendas, embracing a vision of regional unity and cooperation. As said by a Sri Lankan scholar,¹⁸⁷

“SAARC’s future success will depend on the collective commitment of member states to set aside bilateral issues, prioritise regional interests and implement decisions in a time-bound, result-oriented manner”.

Thus, it is high time for the members to strengthen cooperation, surpassing all the hurdles of contemporary times.

¹⁸⁷ Research Assistant, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, online interview, interviewed on September 08, 2024.

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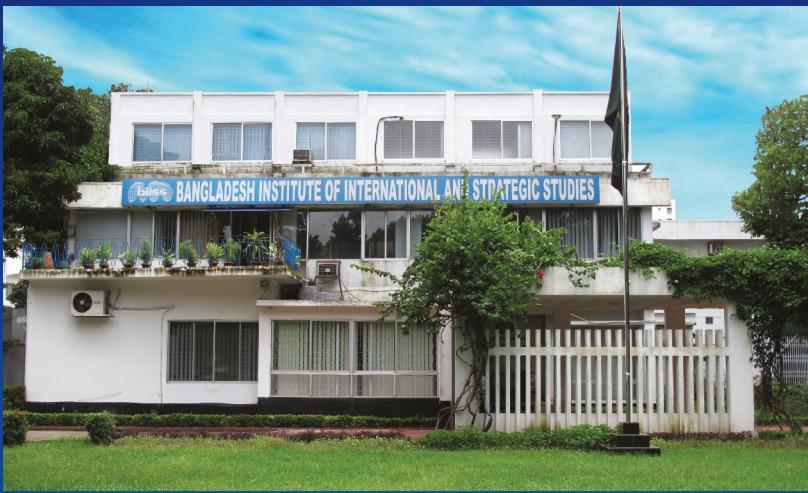
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