PROCEEDINGS

Seminar on

Rebuilding Trust, Renewing Regional Integration: Pathways for Revitalising SAARC

06 July 2026



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Published by
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: (880-2) 48312625
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

Date of Publication : 30 July, 2026
Price : BDT 120 | US$ 5

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Rebuilding Trust, Renewing Regional Integration: Pathways for Revitalising SAARC
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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Seminar on "**Rebuilding Trust, Renewing Regional Integration: Pathways for Revitalising SAARC"** on Monday, 06 July 2026, at the BIISS Auditorium. **Major General A S M Ridwanur Rahman, awc, afwc, psc, G,** Director General, BIISS, delivered the welcome address and chaired the Session. **Shama Obaed Islam, MP**, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, graced the Seminar as the Chief Guest.

The Keynote Presentation was delivered by **Ambassador Tariq A Karim**, Advisor, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies, Independent University, Bangladesh, and Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of South Asia Studies, National University of Singapore. The presentation was followed by a Panel Discussion featuring **Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas**, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, and **Md Shamsul Haque**, Former Additional Foreign Secretary (SAARC & BIMSTEC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and CEO,

CodersTrust Bangladesh. An Open Discussion Session followed the keynote presentation and panel discussion.

Senior officials from various ministries, members of the diplomatic corps, academics, researchers, representatives from various think tanks, media representatives, university students, and other distinguished guests participated in the Seminar.



Welcome Address



Major General A S M Ridwanur Rahman, awc, afwc, psc, G
Director General
BIISS

Major General A S M Ridwanur Rahman began his welcome address by recalling that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the shared vision of promoting peace, stability, prosperity, and the collective well-being of the peoples of South Asia. He observed that despite this noble aspiration, the organisation has encountered considerable challenges in maintaining political momentum over the years. According to him, deep-rooted geopolitical rivalries, persistent mutual distrust among member states, asymmetries in political and economic capabilities, and prolonged institutional stagnation have collectively weakened the effectiveness of SAARC and diminished its credibility as the principal regional organisation in South Asia.

He then cautioned against the perception that SAARC has become irrelevant. He emphasised that over the past four decades, the organisation has achieved tangible results across a range of functional and non-political sectors despite prevailing political constraints. In particular, he highlighted SAARC's contributions to poverty alleviation, agriculture, public health, education, disaster management, cultural cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. He further observed that institutions such as the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) and various specialised regional centres have demonstrated that meaningful cooperation among member states remains possible even in periods marked by political disagreements. These experiences, he argued, illustrate that regional collaboration can continue in carefully selected areas where common interests outweigh political differences.

Against this backdrop, Major General Rahman explained that the objectives of the Seminar was not to revisit longstanding political debates surrounding SAARC, but rather to identify

practical and forward-looking pathways for revitalising regional cooperation. He stressed that rebuilding trust among the member states constitutes both the most fundamental prerequisite and the greatest challenge in any meaningful effort to revive the organisation. Without restoring mutual confidence, he argued, institutional reforms and policy initiatives alone would be insufficient to generate sustainable regional cooperation.

The Director General further noted that evolving geopolitical developments in South Asia during the preceding year had generated cautious optimism regarding the prospects for renewed regional engagement. He referred to what he viewed as positive political developments across the region, including Pakistan's increasing role in international mediation, democratic developments in Nepal and Bangladesh, improvements in Bangladesh's bilateral relations with Pakistan and several neighbouring countries, and Bangladesh's growing diplomatic visibility under the leadership of the Honourable Foreign Minister at the United Nations General Assembly. Collectively, he suggested, these developments provide Bangladesh with greater diplomatic space to exercise constructive influence and potentially play a meaningful mediating role in promoting reconciliation and rebuilding confidence among South Asian states.

Reflecting on Bangladesh's historical contribution to regional cooperation, he reminded the audience that the idea of greater regional collaboration in South Asia was first envisioned by the late President Ziaur Rahman, and that the conceptual foundation of SAARC was developed on the very premises of BIISS under his visionary leadership. He described this historical legacy as placing a moral responsibility upon both BIISS and the Government of Bangladesh to continue advocating for the revitalisation of SAARC. In his view, achieving this objective requires a comprehensive whole-of-government approach involving not only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also other relevant ministries, institutions, and stakeholders. At the same time, he emphasised that regional cooperation must remain inclusive by engaging all member states and, more importantly, responding to the aspirations and expectations of the peoples of South Asia.

He observed that the ultimate objective of regional integration should be to translate the shared aspirations of South Asian societies into practical cooperation through realistic and pragmatic approaches. Recognising the current political realities, however, he cautioned against expecting an immediate or dramatic revival of SAARC. Instead, he argued that the organisation should pursue gradual progress by focusing on small, visible, and achievable successes in carefully selected people-centric sectors. Such incremental gains, he maintained, would gradually restore confidence among member states while demonstrating the continued value of regional cooperation to their respective populations.

He further argued that priority areas for future cooperation should be selected based on their broad relevance to national development priorities across the region. In this regard, he identified regional economic cooperation and trade integration as one of the most important areas deserving renewed attention. While acknowledging that numerous studies have identified bureaucratic complexities, protectionist trade policies, non-tariff barriers, inadequate regional connectivity, and institutional weaknesses as major obstacles to intra-regional trade, he contended that another equally significant challenge lies in the profound asymmetries that exist

among South Asian countries. Differences in population size, economic capacity, gross domestic product, industrial development, and overall trade potential, he observed, make the pursuit of meaningful regional trade integration considerably more complex than is often acknowledged in academic and policy literature.



Major General Rahman argued that future efforts to promote regional economic integration should be supported by rigorous research, evidence-based policy analysis, and careful evaluation of regional realities. Rather than dismissing the prospects for integration, he emphasised the importance of adopting a holistic analytical framework that accounts for the structural disparities that characterise South Asia. Only through such an approach, he suggested, can policymakers identify realistic and sustainable pathways towards greater regional economic cooperation.

The Director General further observed that the revitalisation of SAARC should not be viewed merely as an institutional or bureaucratic exercise. Instead, he argued that policymakers and researchers must undertake a comprehensive examination of the structural, political, institutional, and strategic constraints that continue to impede regional cooperation. Such an assessment, he maintained, is essential for identifying practical policy options that are firmly grounded in contemporary regional realities while remaining responsive to the shared interests of South Asian societies.

Against this broader context, he explained that BIISS has organised the Seminar to initiate a sustained process of scholarly discussion, policy dialogue, and informed debate on the future

of regional cooperation in South Asia. He expressed hope that the keynote presentation, panel discussion, and interactions with participants would generate diverse perspectives, constructive recommendations, and innovative policy ideas to inform a comprehensive roadmap for the revitalisation of SAARC. He further noted that the proceedings of the Seminar would be consolidated and shared with the relevant government agencies to support future policy deliberations on regional cooperation.

In concluding his address, he reiterated his confidence that the Seminar would provide an important platform for thoughtful, constructive, and forward-looking discussions on rebuilding trust and renewing regional integration in South Asia.

Keynote Presentation

South Asia's Regional Dilemma: Rebuilding Trust and Renewing Regional Integration as Pathways for Revitalising SAARC



Ambassador Tariq A Karim

Advisor, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies
Independent University, Bangladesh, &
Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow
Institute of South Asia Studies
National University of Singapore

Ambassador Tariq A Karim commenced his keynote presentation by depicting regional cooperation in South Asia as an unfinished project and observed that any discussion on this subject is both politically urgent and intellectually challenging. Consequently, he raised two sets of questions: is SAARC dead, as some have argued since the middle of the last decade? Or is it better understood as comatose—alive in a regional intensive care unit, still supported by technical organs, professional networks, and the unrealised aspirations of nearly two billion people? Why did Europe, ASEAN, and several African regional organisations move forward, however imperfectly, toward cooperation, while South Asia—despite shared histories, cultures, rivers, markets, and ecological vulnerabilities—has remained trapped in mistrust?

Ambassador Karim laid out the central argument of his keynote: South Asia inherited a rigid Westphalian model of sovereignty that never fully corresponded to the region's deeply interconnected civilisational, social, economic, and ecological realities. The Partition of 1947 intensified that inherited rigidity by turning fluid spaces into hard borders and shared memories into competing national narratives. SAARC was created as a response to this dilemma, but it has never been allowed to overcome it.

In the following phase of his presentation, Ambassador Karim made three points. First, South Asia's regional dilemma is rooted in an inherited and rigid understanding of sovereignty, sharpened by the trauma of partition. Second, SAARC's paralysis is not the result of an absence of common interests, but of too little trust to manage those interests. Third, the way forward lies in pragmatic, issue-based cooperation—especially on ecological security, river governance, connectivity, and people-to-people exchange.

Ambassador Karim pointed out that SAARC was established in Dhaka on 8 December 1985 with an ambitious but sensible purpose: to promote welfare, improve the quality of life, accelerate economic growth, strengthen collective self-reliance, and deepen mutual trust among South Asian countries. Nearly four decades later, those objectives remain relevant. If anything, they have become more urgent.

However, he candidly expressed his opinion that SAARC's political momentum has stalled. Its summit process has remained suspended since 2015, bilateral tensions have repeatedly overwhelmed regional agendas, and the institution has often appeared unable to respond to the very problems it was created to address. The tragedy is not that South Asia lacks common interests. The tragedy is that South Asia has many common interests trapped inside too much political distrust. Therefore, he believes the solution to SAARC's inherent weakness lies beyond institutional reform alone. It is the deeper task of rebuilding trust. Without trust, even the best-designed institutions remain fragile. With trust, even modest institutions can become vehicles of transformation.

Ambassador Karim brought out examples from other regions that validate the notion that cooperation is possible even after conflict. Europe began its post-war integration not with a grand political union, but with practical cooperation in coal and steel. Over time, those functional beginnings created habits of interdependence that made conflict less thinkable and cooperation more useful. Europe did not abolish sovereignty; it learned to pool sovereignty where cooperation produced greater security and prosperity than isolation. The lesson for South Asia is not to copy the European Union. The lesson is that even historical adversaries can build cooperation when leaders decide that the future must not remain hostage to the past.

In a similar vein, he referred to ASEAN, which offers another lesson. It was born in a region of mistrust, ideological confrontation, and territorial disputes. Its method was cautious, consensus-driven, and incremental. ASEAN's achievement was not the absence of disagreement; it was the management of disagreement through continuing dialogue and practical restraint, and the great wisdom of the largest member, Indonesia, in ceding space to smaller and less developed member states at the time of inception.

African regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the South African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC) also demonstrate that regional cooperation can withstand setbacks when there is political will and institutional continuity. Today, their experiments in regional integration appear to be at an advanced stage of realising collective goals, and certainly at an exponentially more advanced stage than South Asia. Their experiences may be imperfect, but they demonstrate a simple truth: regionalism is not built by perfection; it is built by persistence and unwavering commitment.

He believed it would be wise to remember that most ASEAN, African, and South Asian states were former colonies of the European powers that established the EU, and that these states lost their individual great-power status at the end of World War II.



For Ambassador Karim, the puzzle therefore is not whether regional cooperation is possible among post-colonial societies. It clearly is, as demonstrated in Southeast Asia and Africa. The puzzle is why South Asia, with its dense cultural ties, intertwined economies, common ecological systems, and long histories of interaction, has been unable to convert interdependence into cooperation when other similar colonised peoples in other regions have largely, even remarkably, succeeded.

Part of the answer lies in the inherited state system. Most South Asian states emerged from colonial rule with legal sovereignty, but also with contested identities, uneven institutions and deep anxieties about territorial integrity. Colonialism did not merely draw borders; it reorganised political imagination. It encouraged elites to think of security primarily in territorial terms and to view neighbouring states less as partners than as potential threats.

Ambassador Karim argued that the Westphalian model of the state emerged from Europe's historical experience and is commonly associated with territorial sovereignty, legal equality, and non-interference. But when this model was exported to Asia and Africa, it entered societies with very different histories, political cultures and civilisational geographies. South Asia before colonial consolidation was not a set of sealed territorial containers. It was a layered region of empires, princely states, trading routes, pilgrimage networks, linguistic continuums, river basins and ecological zones. Communities moved, traded, worshipped, married, and migrated across spaces that later became borders.

Subsequently, partition became a civilisational rupture. It divided families, markets, rivers, railways, ports, memories and identities. It turned shared spaces into contested territories and everyday mobility into a matter of passports, visas, suspicion, and security clearance. One may think of partition as the division of a family house. The walls may be legally recognised, but the courtyard, the well, the kitchen smoke, and the family stories do not disappear. South Asia continues to live inside that divided house. Its people remain connected by language, food, music, migration, rivers and memory, while its states often behave as if those connections are threats rather than assets. However, he believes the partition also produced an enduring syndrome of insecurity. Nationalism became defensive; borders became symbolic battlegrounds; and bilateral disputes repeatedly overwhelmed regional possibilities. This is the historical burden SAARC inherited.

Ambassador Karim believes President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh deserves the sole recognition and credit for his visionary initiative in advancing the idea of South Asian regional cooperation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Smaller states saw regional cooperation as a means to gain a voice, balance, and collective development. India and Pakistan, when approached, viewed the proposal with caution, even suspicion, and initially baulked. Yet the Charter was signed in Dhaka in 1985, and SAARC was born with a promise of cooperation in peace, development, welfare, equality and mutual benefit.

From the beginning, however, centrifugal forces were powerful: partition syndrome, bilateral disputes, competitive nationalism, unresolved grievances, and anxieties about size and influence. SAARC's principle of avoiding bilateral and contentious issues made initial cooperation possible, but it also limited the institution's ability to address the political issues that most constrained regional cooperation.

In War-devastated Europe, centripetal forces gradually drew states toward shared institutions. In ASEAN, leaders cultivated restraint and practical engagement despite initial mistrust. In South Asia, centrifugal forces have far too often prevailed over the logic of coming together to cooperate for mutual benefit. The result is a paradox: the region most in need of cooperation has been among the least able to institutionalise it.

Ambassador Karim believes that SAARC should not be dismissed as meaningless. Technical bodies, professional networks, chambers of commerce, agricultural cooperation platforms, cultural exchanges, and specialised institutions still demonstrate that the idea of regional cooperation has not disappeared. The political summit process may be frozen, but the regional need remains alive.

He explained that rebuilding trust does not mean expecting everyone to suddenly agree. It means changing the way states and societies interact, moving away from seeing one another as permanent threats and toward functioning as neighbours who share a common future.

He stressed that continuous diplomatic engagement is essential, as vague promises and ceremonial handshakes are not enough when societies are deeply divided. Trust requires visible, credible actions i.e. small at first, but concrete enough to persuade citizens that cooperation is not weakness, but enlightened self-interest.

In a set of recommendations, Ambassador Karim argued that first, South Asia must move beyond rigid sovereignty and zero-sum nationalism. The choice is not between sovereignty and cooperation. The real choice is between isolated sovereignty, which cannot solve shared problems, and cooperatively pooled sovereignty, which enhances collective capacity.

Secondly, SAARC should be revitalised from both the bottom up and the top down. Even if summit diplomacy remains difficult, technical cooperation should continue and expand. SAARC's functional bodies, agricultural cooperation, business chambers, parliamentarian networks, academic exchanges and professional platforms should be protected from political freeze. These are not substitutes for political leadership, but they can keep the regional bloodstream flowing.

Third, where the larger regional process appears stymied, sub-regional cooperation must be pursued with seriousness, sub-region-wise or sector-wise. The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) process offers practical possibilities in water, trade, energy, transport and connectivity. BIMSTEC should be reimagined as a genuine, more inclusive Bay of Bengal cooperation platform that includes Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, linking South Asia and Southeast Asia through blue economy cooperation, disaster management, maritime safety and climate resilience. In his opinion, cooperation does not have to begin with the entire region moving at the same speed. Willing countries can move forward on specific issues and create momentum for others.

Fourth, South Asia should shift part of its security imagination from a traditional, territorial threat-perception paradigm to shared, non-traditional but existential threats such as climate change, glacial melt, floods, cyclones, food insecurity, health and water stress. These threats do not respect political borders, nor do they care about the political compulsions of individuals or groups across borders. They affect citizens on all sides, of every denomination, caste, creed or class, of every border. They provide an overriding practical basis for cooperation.

Fifth, South Asia must institutionalise habits of dialogue. Dialogue should not be treated as a reward for good political weather. It should be the instrument through which difficult weather is managed. The region needs regular conversations among diplomats, water experts, climate scientists, business leaders, parliamentarians, young professionals, youth, and civil society actors.

Finally, cooperation must be urgent, intense, and institutional but it need not be dramatic. South Asia does not require one great leap forward. It requires many measured steps moving steadily ahead: a river-data protocol here, a trade facilitation agreement there, a climate adaptation fund, a disaster-response platform, a student mobility scheme, an energy grid conversation, a visa relaxation initiative for scholars and professionals. Ambassador Karim argued that regionalism

is built not only by treaties but also by habits that translate into institutions through the ongoing operationalisation of goals.

Furthermore, according to Ambassador Karim, if there is one domain where South Asia cannot afford paralysis, it is ecological security. Rivers, monsoons, glaciers, deltas, forests, air quality, disease patterns, food systems, and climate risks do not obey political borders. Bangladesh, as a lower riparian deltaic country, understands this reality with particular urgency.

The 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty between Bangladesh and India showed that cooperation is possible even on sensitive issues. But the treaty is due to expire in December 2026, and its renewal will test whether the region can adapt old agreements to new hydrological and climatic realities. The Teesta remains unresolved, and Bangladesh and India share 52 more transboundary rivers. Across the wider region, water, food, energy, health, disaster management, and climate resilience are regional public goods. No country can secure them alone.

The compulsions of ecological integrity may therefore be South Asia's strongest argument for renewed cooperation. The region should consider shared river basin management, early warning systems, climate adaptation financing, joint research, and a regional ecological security dialogue. Such cooperation would not require states to surrender sovereignty. It would require them to recognise that, in an age of climate stress, sovereignty is strengthened by cooperation achieved through the pooling of sovereignty.

Ambassador Karim noted that South Asia's dilemma is not the absence of shared destiny. It is the inability, so far, to organise and embrace that destiny through trust, institutions, and imagination. The Westphalian state gave South Asian states legal sovereignty. Colonialism gave them administrative borders. Partition gave them trauma. However, he believes that history need not be a permanent sentence to life imprisonment. The people of South Asia remain connected by rivers, mountains, monsoons, cultures, labour, migration, markets, music, memory, and vulnerability. The question is whether our states can learn to treat those connections not as liabilities, but as foundations for cooperation.

Ambassador Karim concluded by arguing that SAARC may be comatose, but the idea of South Asian cooperation is not dead. It waits for political courage, intellectual honesty, and institutional patience. The costs of delay are rising climate shocks, water insecurity, food stress, public health risks, economic fragmentation, and strategic vulnerability. Cooperation is difficult, but delay is dangerous.

Panel Discussion



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas
Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka

Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas began his argument that this was particularly important because South Asia is simultaneously becoming more significant in global affairs while remaining one of the least integrated regions in the world. Although the region is home to more than two billion people and possesses immense economic and strategic potential, intra-regional trade remains remarkably low. According to him, the central paradox of South Asia is not the absence of opportunities but the lack of an effective regional institutional architecture to harness them. Discussing the changing strategic environment, Dr Biswas noted that the global context in which SAARC was established in 1985 has transformed fundamentally. He observed that SAARC emerged during the Cold War era, characterised by bipolarity, limited globalisation, and post-colonial state-building. In contrast, the contemporary international environment is shaped by China's rise, Indo-Pacific strategic competition, the digital economy, climate change, artificial intelligence, supply-chain realignments and growing maritime security concerns. Despite these profound transformations, SAARC has remained largely stagnant, with summits suspended, agreements inadequately implemented and institutional development constrained. He emphasised that while the strategic environment has evolved dramatically, the organisation itself has changed very little.

Dr Biswas then discussed the transition from classical geopolitics to what he termed "meta-geopolitics". He explained that traditional geopolitical thinking revolves around territory, borders, military power, sovereignty, rivalry and balance-of-power politics. In contrast, meta-geopolitics focuses on human security, connectivity, climate action, public health, regional public goods and collective resilience. He argued that South Asia's future cooperation should increasingly be organised around shared vulnerabilities. Through this lens, challenges such as climate change, health crises, connectivity deficits and digital divides become opportunities for functional cooperation that transcend long-standing political rivalries. He therefore raised the question of whether South Asia can move from geopolitical regionalism toward a more

meta-geopolitical form of regionalism. Building on this conceptual understanding, Dr Biswas proposed a meta-geopolitical framework for South Asia based on six interconnected domains: human security, climate resilience, energy transition, digital economy, blue economy and health security. He argued that cooperation in these areas can generate regional public goods and strengthen collective resilience. By focusing on practical, functional areas of common concern, South Asian countries can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes while avoiding the political deadlocks that have historically impeded regional cooperation.



Turning to regional institutional arrangements, Dr Biswas outlined three possible trajectories for SAARC. The first is the continuation of the status quo under which SAARC would remain largely dormant while alternative regional and sub-regional mechanisms increasingly fill the gap. The second option, which he described as "Functional SAARC," would prioritise cooperation in specific sectors such as climate change, health security, and disaster management while decoupling these issues from contentious political disputes. The third option, "SAARC Plus," envisaged an expanded and more flexible regional architecture involving dialogue partners and development actors.

He stressed that any meaningful revival of regional cooperation would require the political will to separate functional collaboration from geopolitical rivalry. In elaborating the concept of "SAARC Plus," Dr Biswas presented an illustrative model of expanded regional cooperation. The proposed architecture would retain the eight SAARC member states at its core while engaging major dialogue partners such as China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States in a secondary layer. International development institutions, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB),

the World Bank, and United Nations agencies, would constitute an outer ring. Cooperation would focus on areas such as energy, connectivity, health, climate change, disaster response and the digital economy. He clarified that the model was intended as a conceptual framework for discussion rather than a formal policy proposal.

Dr Biswas also drew lessons from other regional organisations to demonstrate the feasibility of flexible and inclusive regionalism. Referring to ASEAN, he highlighted the value of dialogue partnerships and layered cooperation mechanisms that have enabled the organisation to remain relevant despite diversity among its members. Referring to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, he underscored that strategic rivals could coexist within a common institutional framework when cooperation is focused on carefully defined agendas. The European Union, meanwhile, illustrated how sectoral cooperation can gradually build trust and generate the political capital necessary for deeper forms of regional integration.

Addressing Bangladesh's role, Dr Biswas argued that the country is uniquely positioned to contribute to a renewed regionalism by serving as a producer of regional public goods. He identified Bangladesh's strengths in three areas: its global leadership in UN peacekeeping and climate diplomacy, its strategic location in the Bay of Bengal and potential role as a connectivity hub, and its growing capacities in digital governance, pharmaceuticals and disaster management. These assets, he suggested, could enable Bangladesh to play a leading role in promoting functional cooperation and regional resilience across South Asia.

In the policy recommendations section, Dr Biswas proposed several measures for revitalising regional cooperation. These included separating functional cooperation from bilateral political disputes, strengthening the SAARC Secretariat through greater resources and institutional autonomy, expanding collaboration in non-contentious sectors, exploring flexible dialogue mechanisms under a "SAARC Plus" framework and promoting the creation of regional public goods through meta-geopolitical cooperation. He argued that these steps could help establish a more pragmatic and resilient foundation for regional engagement.

In conclusion, Dr Biswas contrasted the trajectory of SAARC in 1985 and 2026. He noted that the earlier model linked geopolitics to regional cooperation but ultimately resulted in political paralysis. The future, he argued, lies in a meta-geopolitical approach centred on regional public goods and collective resilience. He concluded by emphasising that the key challenge for South Asia is not merely ensuring the survival of SAARC but redesigning regional cooperation to reflect the realities of a rapidly changing geopolitical and meta-geopolitical environment.



Md Shamsul Haque
Former Additional Foreign Secretary
(SAARC & BIMSTEC)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, &
CEO
CodersTrust Bangladesh

Md Shamsul Haque began by focusing on practical pathways to revitalising SAARC from a practitioner's perspective, rather than revisiting the challenges already outlined by the keynote speaker and the preceding panellist. He drew from his experience as Bangladesh's National Focal Point for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for six years. He began by arguing that rebuilding trust should constitute the central objective of any effort to revive regional cooperation and emphasised that this required both political commitment and institutional reform. According to him, the existing SAARC Charter imposes significant limitations by excluding bilateral political issues from formal deliberations, thereby preventing member states from addressing many of the underlying obstacles to regional cooperation. He maintained that meaningful revitalisation would therefore require reforms to the Charter, greater reliance on quiet and inclusive diplomacy, and the adoption of more flexible diplomatic mechanisms to foster confidence among member states.

He observed that several pressing political and security issues including India–Pakistan relations and the evolving situation in Afghanistan have inevitably influenced SAARC despite remaining outside its formal agenda. He argued that ignoring such realities has constrained the organisation's effectiveness. To overcome this impasse, he proposed expanding opportunities for informal diplomacy through structured yet unofficial dialogues among policymakers, diplomats, experts, and business representatives. Drawing comparisons with regional practices under BIMSTEC, he suggested that Bangladesh could initiate informal consultations involving SAARC countries without necessarily convening formal SAARC meetings. As an illustration, he cited the virtual consultation convened by the Indian Prime Minister with SAARC leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that cooperation among SAARC countries can proceed outside the formal institutional framework when circumstances require.

He then emphasised that trust-building must begin with areas where consensus already exists; he recommended identifying sectors of cooperation that enjoy broad support before attempting to address more contentious issues. He suggested that Bangladesh could take the

initiative by organising informal retreats, policy dialogues, working dinners, and side meetings alongside official gatherings to facilitate candid exchanges among participants. Such interactions, he argued, would create the necessary environment for brainstorming, confidence-building and gradual consensus formation that formal negotiations alone cannot achieve.

Turning to institutional reforms, he stressed the need to strengthen both the SAARC Secretariat and the SAARC Wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He argued that the Secretariat should be provided with greater institutional continuity through longer tenures for the Secretary-General and Directors, as well as the establishment of permanent professional positions to preserve institutional knowledge and expertise. Referring to comparable practices within ASEAN, he noted that stronger institutional memory would significantly improve policy implementation and coordination. He further observed that the SAARC Wing of the Ministry should be equipped with greater financial resources and administrative authority to coordinate effectively with sectoral ministries responsible for implementing SAARC programmes across diverse areas of cooperation.

Mr Haque then highlighted the importance of human resource development in regional integration; he expressed regret over the closure of the SAARC Human Resources Development Centre, describing it as a missed opportunity for regional capacity-building. Drawing on his current role as CEO of CodersTrust Bangladesh, he pointed to the growing significance of artificial intelligence, digital skills, and cybersecurity in shaping the future regional agenda. He noted that artificial intelligence has become an integral part of everyday life while also creating new vulnerabilities in data privacy and cyber threats.

In concluding his remarks, he reiterated that rebuilding trust must remain the starting point for revitalising SAARC. He encouraged Bangladesh to assume a proactive leadership role by promoting informal diplomacy, strengthening institutional mechanisms, engaging sectoral ministries more effectively, and facilitating sustained dialogue among regional stakeholders. He also recognised the important contribution that the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) can make by organising regular analytical seminars, policy dialogues, and track-two discussions involving representatives from SAARC member states and other regional partners. He expressed confidence that such sustained engagement would meaningfully contribute to restoring confidence among member states and to advancing the long-term revitalisation of SAARC.

Open Discussion



Md Jaouadul Karim

Monitoring and Evaluation Associate
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

Md Jaouadul Karim observed that regional organisations frequently went through periods of dormancy before regaining momentum and remarked that Bangladesh, as the founding architect of SAARC, once again appeared to be assuming a leading role in revitalising the organisation. Referring to the prevailing regional environment, including persistent tensions between India and Pakistan and the emergence of alternative regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC, he asked what gave the panellists confidence that the present revitalisation efforts could succeed where previous attempts had fallen short.

Fatema-Tuj-Juhra

Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)



Fatema-Tuj-Juhra addressed her question to Professor Biswas, recalling that she had been his student in the South Asian Affairs course approximately a decade earlier. She noted that he had expressed optimism about South Asian cooperation at the time and observed that many remain equally hopeful today. She asked whether meaningful South Asian connectivity and integration could realistically be achieved while serious political disputes among member states persisted. Drawing upon her experience teaching Generation Z (i.e., Gen Z) students, she remarked that many questioned whether students from universities across South Asia could participate in shared classrooms and academic exchanges despite existing political tensions. She therefore sought the panellist's views on how trust could first be established and how Track II or informal diplomacy could be strengthened when official summits remained suspended, and political disagreements remained severe.



Tanvir Mohammad Dipu

Member
Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)

Tanvir Mohammad Dipu observed that many speakers has already identified the principal obstacles confronting SAARC and argued that the organisation remained stagnant primarily due to a lack of trust between India and Pakistan. Speaking from the perspective of the business community, he emphasised Bangladesh's dependence on imports from China and India, while noting that the United States remained its largest export destination. He further remarked that the evolving international trade environment, including tariff-related challenges and strategic competition involving the United States, China, India and Pakistan, had created additional uncertainty for Bangladesh. Expressing concern over the possibility of renewed conflict between India and Pakistan, he urged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take a proactive role in preserving and revitalising SAARC through renewed diplomatic initiatives.

Ikramul Hossen

Student, Department of Government and Politics
Jahangirnagar University

Ikramul Hossen addressed his question to Professor Biswas regarding the feasibility of a "SAARC Minus" arrangement, drawing a comparison with ASEAN's "ASEAN Minus X" mechanism. He enquired whether regional cooperation within SAARC could continue despite enduring political disputes, particularly in view of the longstanding tensions between India and Pakistan and the more recent challenges involving Afghanistan and Pakistan.





Md Mizanur Rahman

Joint Secretary, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Bangladesh, &
Member, Governing Board,
SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Md Mizanur Rahman highlighted the important contribution that cultural cooperation could make towards revitalising SAARC. Drawing upon his experience as Chairperson of the Governing Board of the SAARC Cultural Centre, he explained that several proposed cultural initiatives, including a SAARC Film Festival and literary programmes proposed by Bangladesh, had unfortunately not received approval by the SAARC Secretariat. He questioned how regional cooperation could flourish without stronger cultural engagement and expressed concern that the limited implementation of cultural programmes ultimately undermined the interests of all member states.

Referring to previous activities organised by the SAARC Cultural Centre, including heritage forums and cultural exchanges involving a limited number of participating countries, he argued that considerably greater emphasis should be placed on practical cultural cooperation through film festivals, music, dance, literary exchanges and other people-to-people initiatives. He concluded by urging both the audience and the panellists to support stronger cultural cooperation as an essential component of SAARC revitalisation.

Ambassador F A Shamim Ahmed

Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan



Ambassador F A Shamim Ahmed began by recalling his personal experience of witnessing the establishment of SAARC in December 1985 while serving as a Director-level officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Reflecting on the organisation's early years, he remarked that SAARC had initially progressed with considerable optimism, citing the successful summits held in Dhaka, Bangalore and Kathmandu. In his view, the first major setback had emerged following the Babri Mosque incident in 1992.

Turning to Ambassador Tariq A Karim's presentation, he commended its quality but observed

that it had devoted relatively little attention to the role that Bangladeshi youth could play in revitalising SAARC. He asked whether the current political circumstances in Bangladesh, including the emergence of a new government, created opportunities for renewed diplomatic initiatives or whether experience had led to greater scepticism regarding SAARC's future. Drawing upon his own diplomatic experience as High Commissioner to Pakistan during the 2004 Islamabad Summit, he recalled that the summit took place despite strained India-Pakistan relations and facilitated the signing of the Islamabad Declaration between Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf. He argued that this example demonstrated the continuing value of SAARC summits as platforms for confidence-building and dialogue, even during periods of heightened political tension.



Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan

Former Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations Office in Geneva

Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan began by reflecting on the theme of revitalising SAARC. Ambassador Shameem observed that the very notion of "revitalisation" implies a loss of vitality that did not emerge recently but had its origins many years ago. He further remarked that when the late President Ziaur Rahman proposed establishing SAARC, the initiative was perceived by some as challenging an emerging regional narrative of domination. Recalling academic discussions from earlier years, the speaker noted that South Asia had often been characterised as Indo-centric, a characterisation with historical basis. According to him, this perception of dominance contributed to a mindset that ultimately led to the exclusion of bilateral political issues from the SAARC framework, a principle later enshrined in the organisation's Charter.

He then raised the fundamental question of how to begin addressing the deep-rooted mistrust that has hindered regional cooperation. Referring to Ambassador Tariq A Karim's remarks on the asymmetry among SAARC member states, he acknowledged that these disparities are grounded in distinct and enduring realities. In this context, he emphasised the importance of identifying and pursuing functional initiatives that can mitigate, at least to some extent, the effects of these asymmetries.

While expressing optimism regarding the future of SAARC, Ambassador Ahsan stressed that such optimism must remain firmly grounded in practical realities. Having witnessed the persistent challenges arising from regional asymmetries, he noted that these disparities have become significant obstacles to meaningful cooperation.

To overcome these challenges, he proposed greater efforts to educate or, more appropriately, to sensitise the people of the region. In his view, people-to-people connectivity represents SAARC's greatest asset and should therefore be strengthened and promoted. He questioned how this objective could be effectively achieved, particularly in light of the media's role over recent years. Without singling out any particular country, the speaker observed that media discourse has often been unconducive to the revitalisation of SAARC.

He further emphasised the need to encourage constructive discussions on SAARC that facilitate, rather than hinder, regional cooperation. Referring to a question raised earlier by Fatema-Tuj-Juhra, he suggested that this provided an important clue: discussions on SAARC should focus on substantive issues rather than polemics. According to him, public discourse has too often emphasised controversy and unsubstantiated claims at the expense of factual analysis, an imbalance that requires correction.

Finally, he highlighted Ambassador Tariq A Karim's observation regarding the importance of cultivating a habit of cooperation. He argued that this process must begin with the youth, who will shape the region's future. Greater opportunities should therefore be created for young people to engage in informed, fact-based discussions on regional cooperation rather than debates driven by political polemics. He observed that discussions among young people frequently revolve around contentious issues instead of identifying shared interests and opportunities for mutual benefit. In conclusion, he suggested that meaningful progress would require greater introspection and a stronger focus on areas of common interest, rather than continued emphasis on issues that have historically impeded regional cooperation.

Radia Tabassum

Student, Department of International Relations
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)



Radia Tabassum introduced her question by expressing a particular interest in the transition from traditional geopolitics to meta-geopolitics and in the evolving concept of "SAARC Plus". She observed that South Asia faces a range of shared challenges, including climate change, climate-induced migration, water scarcity, and broader water security concerns. Against this backdrop, she asked whether these non-traditional and multidimensional vulnerabilities could serve as catalysts for the revival of SAARC by compelling member states to cooperate in areas where traditional hard-power diplomacy has thus far proved unsuccessful.



Riayana Binte Siddique

Student, Department of Government and Politics
Jahangirnagar University

Riayana Binte Siddique referred to Professor Biswas's observation that there remains reason to be optimistic about the revitalisation of SAARC. Building on this premise, the participant asked if SAARC were successfully revitalised, the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China could indirectly affect the organisation's effectiveness. The participant further inquired whether, if such an impact were likely, SAARC should adopt measures to preserve its strategic autonomy as it navigates the broader dynamics of great-power competition.

Dr Iqra Sharafat

Deputy Director
South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO)



Dr Iqra Sharafat directed a question to Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas. Referring to his discussion on regional geopolitics and meta-geopolitics, she noted Dr Biswas' emphasis on prioritising areas that could strengthen regional integration, as well as his observation regarding the limited level of intra-regional trade in South Asia. The participant also highlighted the potential contribution of sectoral stakeholders, particularly trade-related agencies, to advancing regional cooperation.

Building on these observations, she remarked that, along with geopolitical dialogue, technical cooperation can play a significant role in promoting regional integration. She therefore asked whether it would be possible for the relevant stakeholders to develop a mechanism or institutional pathway to enable technical cooperation among SAARC member states to continue regardless of prevailing political circumstances. She further inquired whether any such provision or mechanism already exists within the SAARC framework and requested Dr Biswas to elaborate on the matter.



Parizad Ali Khan

Student, Department of International Relations
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Parizad Ali Khan observed that several of the preceding questions had addressed similar themes concerning the future of regional integration in South Asia. Referring to the panellists' discussion, she noted the argument that efforts toward regional integration and the possible revitalisation of SAARC should increasingly focus on issue-based cooperation, particularly regarding non-traditional security challenges. The participant further observed that addressing such challenges inherently requires transnational cooperation among states.

Against this background, she questioned whether meaningful regional integration around non-traditional security issues is feasible, given the strong nationalist orientations and state-centric policy priorities that characterise many South Asian countries. She further asked whether, if such a space for cooperation exists, what practical approaches or mechanisms could facilitate and sustain this form of regional integration?

Dr Shamsun Naher Khanom

Professor, Department of Government and Politics
Jahangirnagar University



Dr Shamsun Naher Khanom shared the view that one of the panellists had appropriately emphasised the importance of fostering informal relationships among SAARC member states. From an academic perspective, she strongly advocated for greater youth engagement, particularly through increased interaction among university students across the SAARC countries. She emphasised that enhanced academic collaboration, joint research partnerships, and greater student mobility constitute important forms of informal regional engagement that can strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation.

She further proposed establishing additional SAARC-affiliated universities and academic institutions across the member states, arguing that such initiatives would deepen connections among the youth of the region and foster a more conducive environment for regional cooperation and integration. In her view, these measures would advance the broader objectives of SAARC and help realise the vision originally envisaged by the late President Ziaur Rahman at the time of the conception of the organisation.



Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman

Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Sri Lanka and Singapore, & Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China

Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman emphasised that the primary rationale for reviving SAARC should remain economic cooperation. Drawing on personal experience from service in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he recalled the work of the SAARC-appointed Group of Eminent Persons, which had formulated a long-term vision for regional integration by 2020. The Ambassador noted that the group's recommendations envisaged a phased and systematic process beginning with the establishment of a free trade area, followed by a customs union and, ultimately, an economic union. The vision also included the creation of a South Asian Development Bank, the strengthening of initiatives for poverty alleviation, and the enhancement of regional connectivity.

Referring to Ambassador Karim's observations, he agreed that issue-based cooperation in non-contentious areas, particularly poverty eradication and connectivity, could provide a practical foundation for revitalising regional collaboration. He further reflected on his previous experience in SAARC committee meetings, particularly the Programming Committee, noting that discussions often encountered disagreements over budgetary and programming matters. In light of this, he suggested that clearer political guidance should be provided to facilitate consensus-building. Specifically, the participant recommended that informal consultations among member states be held prior to formal Programming Committee meetings, echoing an earlier suggestion made by panellist Md Shamsul Haque. Such consultations, he argued, would help member states align their objectives and priorities before formal deliberations. The participant concluded by emphasising on the importance of clear policy directions from both the Standing Committee and the Council of Ministers to facilitate agreement on broad, common areas of cooperation.

During the Keynote Presentation, **Pooja Kumari Jha**, Second Secretary (Political & Information), High Commission of India in Dhaka, flagged the issue regarding using a map of South Asia in which the contested area of Jammu and Kashmir has been shown as part of Pakistan, and mentioned that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral and inalienable part of India and that the map displayed was incorrect. **Muhammad Wasif**, Deputy High Commissioner at the High Commission for Pakistan in Dhaka, also sought permission to make a comment. However, the Keynote Presenter, **Ambassador Tarik A Karim**, mentioned that the map has been used only for presentation purposes and does not depict actual political boundaries. In this regard, BIISS believes that disputed boundaries on any map should be shown with dashed lines to avoid misunderstanding and contention.

Responses from the Keynote Presenter and Panellists



Ambassador Tariq A Karim

Advisor, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies
Independent University, Bangladesh, &
Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow
Institute of South Asia Studies
National University of Singapore

Ambassador Tariq A Karim remarked that Bangladesh has consistently demonstrated leadership in promoting regional cooperation despite its relatively modest size, arguing that such leadership was both logical and necessary given the geographical location of the country. He mentioned that Bangladesh's development was inseparable from the prosperity of its surrounding region, as trade and regional connectivity had become central elements of interstate relations and economic growth.

Recalling the origins of SAARC, he noted that the late President Ziaur Rahman recognised that Bangladesh could not prosper in isolation and therefore took the initiative to establish a framework for regional cooperation at a time when others had been reluctant to do so. He argued that Bangladesh should continue to draw inspiration from this legacy by pursuing all available avenues for strengthening regional cooperation.

Turning to BIMSTEC, he observed that although the organisation had broadened its scope under its present name, it still did not encompass all of the principal countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal and therefore remained conceptually incomplete. He urged participants to move beyond land-centric approaches to regionalism and instead recognise Bangladesh's longstanding historical role as a bridge between South Asia, Southeast Asia and the wider world. Throughout history, he argued, the region had prospered through trade, exchanges and human connectivity, which should remain the guiding principles of contemporary regional cooperation.

Finally, he advised against pursuing concepts such as "SAARC Plus" or "SAARC Minus", arguing instead that Bangladesh should focus on whichever forms of cooperation most effectively advanced its national interests while helping to revive meaningful regional dialogue.



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka

Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas acknowledged that connectivity remained central to any meaningful revitalisation of SAARC. He argued that the region needed to rethink existing patterns of cooperation and broaden the understanding of connectivity beyond physical infrastructure to include sectors such as education, healthcare, health tourism and climate change. He mentioned that maritime connectivity had created significant new opportunities and remained optimistic about expanding regional cooperation in these fields.

Referring specifically to educational cooperation, he observed that the South Asian University represented one of SAARC's most commendable initiatives but had failed to realise its original vision because political developments had prevented its expansion into a genuinely regional institution. He explained that the university had encountered financial constraints as several member states had failed to honour their funding commitments. Nevertheless, he argued that technological advances now made it unnecessary to rely solely on physical campuses and suggested that universities across South Asia could collaborate through virtual and hybrid teaching arrangements.

Professor Biswas further argued that even where government-to-government relations remained difficult, non-governmental actors—including universities and think tanks—should continue dialogue and collaboration. While acknowledging existing political tensions, he cautioned against assuming that such tensions would inevitably escalate into war, noting that interstate conflict should be understood within a broader strategic context.

Addressing the proposal for a "SAARC Minus" formula, he remarked that ASEAN's institutional arrangements had evolved in response to its own geopolitical circumstances and that similar arrangements might not presently be appropriate for South Asia. He suggested that maintaining an inclusive regional framework would be preferable under the current circumstances.



Md Shamsul Haque
Former Additional Foreign Secretary
(SAARC & BIMSTEC)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, &
CEO
CodersTrust Bangladesh

Md Shamsul Haque remarked that flexible forms of regional cooperation were indeed possible and noted that similar mechanisms already existed within ASEAN, where member states could voluntarily opt out of particular projects without preventing others from moving forward. He observed that comparable practices were already evident in South Asia, citing regional road connectivity projects in which countries such as Sri Lanka did not participate due to geographical realities. He explained that member states could choose not to participate in specific initiatives while continuing to support broader institutional processes and confirmed that efforts in this direction were already under consideration.



Speech by the Chief Guest



Shama Obaed Islam, MP
Honourable State Minister
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Shama Obaed Islam, **MP**, delivered a comprehensive and forward-looking address on the prospects for revitalising regional cooperation in South Asia through SAARC. Her remarks underscored the continuing relevance of regionalism in a rapidly changing global environment and highlighted Bangladesh's commitment to fostering trust, cooperation, and functional regional integration. Her speech reflected both a realistic assessment of the challenges facing SAARC and an optimistic vision for its gradual revitalisation through practical and people-centred cooperation. She observed that the seminar was being held at a time when regionalism was experiencing renewed momentum across the world. Regions were becoming increasingly interconnected, economically interdependent, and more conscious of the need to address shared challenges collectively. Against this backdrop, she noted that South Asia, despite possessing immense human, cultural, economic, and strategic potential, remained considerably less integrated than its capabilities would suggest. The central challenge, therefore, was to bridge the gap between the region's vast potential and its actual performance.

The State Minister highlighted that South Asia is characterised by geographical proximity, deep historical linkages and rich cultural connections. Yet, despite these advantages, the region remains politically fragmented and economically under-integrated. She recalled that the founding vision of regional cooperation in South Asia was based on the understanding that the peoples of the region shared common challenges and aspirations and therefore required a common institutional platform to pursue collective progress. According to her, this rationale remains as valid today as it was at the time of the inception of SAARC. Indeed, she argued that the need for meaningful regional cooperation has become even more urgent in the contemporary context, given the multitude of economic, environmental, developmental, and security challenges confronting the region.

Addressing the current state of SAARC, the Honourable State Minister acknowledged that the organisation has faced significant challenges over the years. The summit process has remained stalled, political trust among member states has weakened, and regional integration has failed to reach its anticipated level. She noted that bilateral tensions and unresolved disputes have repeatedly hindered the organisation's momentum and limited its effectiveness. As a founding member and the birthplace of SAARC, Bangladesh has a special responsibility to reflect on whether sufficient efforts have been made to uphold the organisation's founding ideals and prevent its gradual stagnation. However, she stressed that this moment calls not merely for national reflection but for collective introspection by all member states. She invited participants to consider how far South Asia might have progressed had the region consistently demonstrated the political commitment and sustained engagement necessary to realise the promise of regional cooperation over the past four decades, particularly during the last seventeen years. Instead, she remarked that those years have largely been a story of missed opportunities.

Despite these challenges, she emphasised that SAARC remains institutionally relevant. Its Charter remains in force; the Secretariat remains functional; specialised bodies and regional centres continue their work; and the organisation retains valuable legal instruments, technical networks, and institutional memory. These assets, she argued, provide an important foundation upon which future efforts at revitalisation can be built. However, any serious initiative to revive SAARC must begin with an honest assessment of the factors that have contributed to its current predicament.

In this regard, she identified several structural and political impediments that have constrained SAARC's effectiveness. Political mistrust, unresolved bilateral disputes, cross-border tensions, power asymmetries, and differing security perceptions have collectively hampered regional cooperation. In particular, longstanding tensions between India and Pakistan have frequently complicated consensus-building and slowed the implementation of regional initiatives. Nevertheless, she cautioned against viewing SAARC's challenges solely through a political lens. Institutional weaknesses have also played a significant role. The organisation requires stronger implementation mechanisms, greater financial resources, more effective specialised institutions and a stronger culture of follow-up and execution. Consequently, revitalisation must involve both renewed political goodwill and comprehensive institutional reform.

A major theme of the State Minister's remarks was the centrality of trust in regional cooperation. She described trust as the foundation upon which successful regional integration is built. Without trust, connectivity initiatives become difficult to implement, trade remains constrained, and even technical cooperation becomes vulnerable to political fluctuations. However, she emphasised that trust does not necessarily emerge through grand political declarations. Rather, it can be cultivated gradually through practical and sustained cooperation in functional areas. She also illustrated how trust-building can occur through collaboration among health professionals who share disease surveillance information, trade officials who work to simplify customs procedures, climate experts who cooperate on flood forecasting and early warning systems, and disaster management authorities who jointly prepare for emergencies. Similarly, interactions among students, researchers, entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, and

civil society actors can help foster habits of cooperation across national boundaries. While such initiatives may appear modest individually, they help reduce suspicion, enhance confidence, and lay the foundations for broader regional engagement. According to her, practical cooperation in non-controversial sectors can serve as a pathway toward rebuilding trust and strengthening regional solidarity.

Turning to economic integration, she highlighted trade as one of the clearest indicators of South Asia's underperformance. Although the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) remains operational from both legal and administrative perspectives, it has not succeeded in creating the dynamic regional market envisioned by its architects. Numerous obstacles continue to impede intra-regional trade, including extensive sensitive lists, non-tariff and para-tariff barriers, weak logistics infrastructure, customs inefficiencies, inadequate harmonisation of standards and persistent political tensions. As a result, the economic benefits of regional integration have remained largely unrealised.

Considering these realities, she proposed a pragmatic and incremental approach to revitalising SAARC. Rather than focusing exclusively on high-level political processes, she advocated revitalisation from the ground through technical cooperation, institutional strengthening, practical projects, enhanced connectivity and people-centred initiatives. As an initial step, Bangladesh would like to see SAARC operate at what she described as an "optimal functional level" until conditions become conducive for a full political and summit-level revival. She elaborated that this concept does not imply maintaining SAARC merely as a symbolic institution or limiting activities to the bare minimum. Rather, it entails maximising what is realistically achievable under existing circumstances while remaining ambitious in vision and pragmatic in implementation. An optimal functional level, according to the State Minister, would involve regular meetings of technical experts and officials, a predictable schedule of activities, strengthened regional centres and specialised bodies, cooperation in non-contentious sectors and tangible outcomes that directly benefit the peoples of South Asia. She further emphasised the importance of flexible, project-based cooperation among willing member states. Recognising that not all countries may be prepared to participate in every initiative simultaneously, she argued that those ready to cooperate should be allowed to move forward while keeping opportunities open for others to join later. Such flexibility, she suggested, is essential if SAARC is to remain relevant and responsive to changing regional realities.

The State Minister also shared a positive assessment of recent diplomatic engagements undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh. Since the formation of the new government, she had personally held discussions with representatives of all SAARC member states. According to her, these interactions revealed a broadly positive attitude toward the revival of SAARC. She noted that the challenge now lies in transforming expressions of goodwill into concrete action. The intentions and aspirations articulated by member states must be translated into practical initiatives that generate momentum for renewed regional cooperation. Discussing the role of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF), she observed that the institution has considerable potential to support visible, impactful regional projects. However, to realise this potential, its leadership, governance arrangements, and operational capacity must be strengthened. A more effective SDF

could play a significant role in financing initiatives related to public health, agriculture, women's entrepreneurship, climate adaptation, rural development, and broader social development objectives. By delivering tangible benefits to citizens, such projects could reinforce public support for regional cooperation and demonstrate the practical value of SAARC.



The State Minister also reiterated the importance of preserving SAARC as a platform free from bilateral disputes. Referring to the provisions of the SAARC Charter, she emphasised that bilateral and contentious issues should not be introduced into SAARC deliberations. Reaffirming this principle is essential, not because regional organisations should force countries into political dialogue, but because bilateral tensions should not be allowed to paralyse all forms of regional cooperation. At the same time, she stressed that SAARC must remain an inclusive platform that brings together all South Asian countries within a cooperative framework. Maintaining inclusivity while ensuring the continuation of agreed technical and developmental cooperation should remain a guiding principle of future efforts. Addressing the relationship between SAARC and other regional or sub-regional initiatives, particularly BIMSTEC, the State Minister rejected the notion that Bangladesh must choose between the two organisations. In her view, SAARC and BIMSTEC serve complementary rather than competing purposes. While BIMSTEC connects South Asia with the Bay of Bengal region and Southeast Asia, SAARC represents the broader South Asian identity and includes countries that are not members of BIMSTEC. Consequently, sub-regional initiatives should not divert attention from SAARC; instead, they should serve as building blocks for broader regional cooperation. Under the leadership of Honourable Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, Bangladesh remains committed to supporting both organisations, as each contributes to national objectives of connectivity, stability, prosperity, and development.

The State Minister further emphasised the strategic significance of SAARC as a platform that allows smaller states to articulate their interests collectively, enables India to demonstrate constructive regional leadership, keeps Pakistan connected to a broader South Asian framework, and facilitates cooperation on shared challenges even when political disputes remain unresolved. For Bangladesh, SAARC carries both historical and contemporary significance. She recalled that the organisation reflects the diplomatic vision of the late President Ziaur Rahman, whose efforts helped place South Asian regional cooperation on the international agenda. However, she stressed that SAARC's relevance extends beyond its historical origins. It remains closely linked to Bangladesh's future interests in security, trade, climate resilience, food security, connectivity, and international standing. In this sense, SAARC represents both a diplomatic legacy and a potential instrument for advancing Bangladesh's future development and foreign policy objectives. In this regard, the Honourable State Minister described Bangladesh's approach toward SAARC as both hopeful and realistic. While recognising that a return to full political normalcy cannot occur overnight, she rejected the pessimistic view that regional cooperation is no longer possible. Considerable progress, she argued, can still be achieved through realistic, technical, people-centred, and charter-compliant initiatives. The immediate task is to preserve the institution, strengthen what continues to function effectively, repair existing weaknesses and create opportunities for cooperation wherever consensus exists. Such an approach can gradually restore confidence and generate momentum for broader regional engagement. In this context, she revealed that Bangladesh is considering a calibrated set of confidence-building measures in consultation with SAARC member states. These may include engagement with SAARC ambassadors and high commissioners based in Dhaka, consultations with the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, discussions on convening senior officials' meetings, and the possibility of a special session of the Council of Ministers. Broader diplomatic outreach at the highest political levels may also be considered as part of efforts to rebuild confidence and revitalise regional cooperation.

In conclusion, the State Minister remarked that SAARC is waiting for wise leadership, practical cooperation, and renewed confidence. Bangladesh, she affirmed, stands ready to contribute to this process. She expressed encouragement from the active participation of representatives from diverse sectors of society, including civil society organisations and youth participants, at the seminar. Their engagement demonstrated that interest in regional cooperation remains strong and that the aspiration for a more integrated South Asia continues to resonate among the region's people. She assured the participants that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would carefully consider the recommendations and ideas emerging from the discussions. She encouraged continued innovative thinking and collective efforts to transform aspirations for regional cooperation into practical realities, thereby contributing to the revitalisation of SAARC and the advancement of regional prosperity.

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The Editorial Team thankfully acknowledges Research Intern **Nusayr Ahmed Chowdhury, Maliha Jaman** and **Md Nahid al Mahmud** for their assistance in preparing the proceedings

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