

The Challenges of SAARC as a Regional Organization: A special reference to the Indo-Pak Conflict

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Abstract

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges facing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), emphasizing its limited success in fostering regional cooperation. The key argument revolves around the India-Pakistan conflict, which has remained a significant obstacle to the smooth functioning of the organization. The article throws light upon the longstanding tensions between the two nations and the way they hinder collaborative efforts within SAARC, which was established to promote economic and political cooperation among South Asian nations. In addition to the India-Pakistan dispute, it identifies several other factors that contribute to SAARC's underperformance. It highlights India's dominance in the region, which causes discomfort among smaller states, and the increasing influence of China within South Asia, which further complicates regional dynamics. The article also touches upon the issue of bilateralism taking precedence over multilateralism, where countries prefer to resolve issues bilaterally rather than through SAARC's multilateral framework. Despite its potential and strategic location, South Asia remains one of the most underdeveloped regions globally, plagued by political conflicts and socio-economic challenges. Given these complexities, the paper argues that SAARC faces a tough road ahead, especially with the India-Pakistan conflict remaining unresolved. The article concludes that unless these issues are addressed, SAARC's role in regional cooperation will continue to be limited.

Keywords:

South Asia, SAARC, Region, Regional Cooperation, India, Pakistan

Introduction

There is no commonly accepted definition of what a region is. As per differing opinions, it is a very contested concept. However, there has been a consensus that a region implies some “geographical proximity and contiguity” and mutual interdependence. It also includes a certain degree of cultural homogeneity, sense of community or “regionness”.ⁱ Region in international politics is described as ‘a limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual dependence’ and could be differentiated according to the level and scope of exchange, formal organizations, and political interdependence. It involves formal and informal agreements marked by “explicit and implicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations.”ⁱⁱ While geographical proximity has been emphasised by few scholars, cognitive and ideational factors are also given

importance, yet a third group seeks to combine the two perspectives to define a region. Many scholars even today posit that ‘a region is firmly rooted in territorial space: a group of people living in a geographically bounded community, controlling a certain set of natural resources, and united through a certain set of cultural values and common bonds of social order forged by history’. Regionness, these scholars argue, is ‘the convergence of several dimensions’ such as ‘cultural affinity, political regimes, security arrangements and economic policies’ which generates ‘regional coherence within a particular geographic area’. The spatial factor is also considered important in contemporary studies on economic regionalism in which it is argued that economic regionalism primarily hinges ‘on the importance of geographic proximity’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regionalism, then, refers to processes and structures of region-building in terms of closer economic, political, security and socio-cultural linkages between states and societies that geographically proximate. In political science, regionalism is often used synonymous with regional cooperation and regional integration, which could be seen as the opposite ends of a continuum along which regionalism may vary.^{iv} Regionalism has gained prominence in the 21st century, not only as a form of economic, political and social organization, but also as a field of study. Regionalism is an ideology and political movement that seeks to advance the causes of regions. But it is necessary, at the very outset, to distinguish two quite different meanings of the term regionalism. At the international level, regionalism refers to transnational cooperation to achieve a common goal or resolve a shared problem or it refers to a group of countries, such as Western Europe, the Western Balkans, or Southeast Asia, that are linked by geography, history or economic features. Used in this sense, regionalism refers to attempts to reinforce the links between these countries. Today, the foremost example of such an attempt is the European Union (EU).^v There are many other regional organizations like NAFTA, ASEAN, MERCOSUR, Shanghai Cooperation Organization which set a good example for regionalism in today’s globalized world. Another pertinent example in this context is SAARC which stands as a regional organization of the 8 South Asian countries of which India is a dominant member. Though it’s one of the most important regional organizations today, the extent to which it has been promoting and serving the purpose of regionalism is a subject of debate and discussion.

According to Partha S. Ghosh, “South Asia qualifies as a region only in institutional terms. Five elements foster regionalism: Shared history and culture; Political Similitude; Economic cooperation for mutual gain; power balance among member states and non-conflicting strategic postures. It has been argued that historically, there is no reference to South Asia. Reference was only to India. Till 2007, Afghanistan was not a member of SAARC, it was not considered South Asian. He says that, logically if a country quits the group, it ceases to be South Asian. Already given Pakistan’s intransigence, India has been promoting sub regionalism.^{vi} This can be clearly visible in India’s recent focus on organization like BIMSTEC which is acting like a bridge between South Asia and the South East Asia. It excludes Pakistan, Maldives and Afghanistan and includes South East Asian nations like Myanmar and Thailand.

Establishment of SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. SAARC comprises of eight Member States: Afghanistan,

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on 17 January 1987. The objectives of the Association as outlined in the SAARC Charter are: to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials; to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia; to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems; to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries; to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.^{vii} The SAARC Charter which appears as the Constitution of this regional organization, contains provisions on the missions, visions, objectives, principles, structure, and functions of the organization, and so on. The member states are legally bound to follow the provisions of this Charter. However, one of the most important policy issues of the Charter is that it deliberately excludes bilateral and contentious matters from the discussions.^{viii}

SAARC was first envisioned in the late 1970s by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, the military dictator of Bangladesh. Initially, India was apprehensive about SAARC because it perceived the grouping to be an attempt by its smaller neighbours to unite against it. The Cold War politics of the time, too, contributed to India's anxiety. India had a close relationship with the Soviet Union, and it considered Ziaur Rahman to be aligned with the West. It was, therefore, suspicious that SAARC could be an American mechanism to counter Soviet influence in the region. It feared that the association might lead to Asia's own Cold War, creating a pro-Soviet–anti-Soviet rift. This would have played against India's interest since it had close strategic ties with the Soviet Union. Eventually, India agreed to join SAARC due to the interest expressed by the neighbouring countries. The first SAARC meeting took place in Dhaka in 1985, and there have been 18 summits till date. However, the organisation has not had a smooth run. In the 30 years of its history, annual SAARC summits have been postponed 11 times for political reasons, either bilateral or internal.^{ix} Since the last decade, SAARC's performance as a regional organization has come under serious scrutiny. As compared to other regional organizations, its role in strengthening regional cooperation is less than satisfactory, one of the most important reasons being, India-Pakistan conflict. The latest SAARC summit to be held in 2016 in Islamabad was suspended for an indefinite period, as member countries declined to participate, pointing to what they said was the absence of a conducive regional environment.^x

Achievements:

As far as the achievements of SAARC is concerned, it has made significant progress in a number of areas since its inception. Some of the major achievements of the organization include: The establishment of the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993 had been significant which provided for preferential tariffs on trade between SAARC countries. The SAPTA was expanded into the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2004, which provides for duty-free trade on a range of goods between SAARC

countries. SAARC Development Fund (SDF) was established in 1998, which provided financial assistance to SAARC projects in areas such as infrastructure, education, and health. In addition, SAARC Regional Energy Cooperation Program (SECP) was established in 2013, which aimed to promote cooperation on energy issues, such as renewable energy and energy efficiency. The adoption of the SAARC Regional Inter-Governmental Agreement on Cooperation on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution in 2002. The adoption of the SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters on 23 December 2014. The establishment of South Asian University (SAU) in 2010. The operationalization of the SAARC Satellite in 2017. These achievements demonstrate the commitment of SAARC member states to regional cooperation and integration. SAARC has made significant progress in a number of areas, and the organization has the potential to play a key role in promoting peace and prosperity in South Asia.^{xi}

SAPTA was a major achievement of SAARC which was concluded in 1995 to promote trade, cross border investments and economic integration. However, the agreement had only a marginal impact in promoting trade since the members were reluctant to open up their markets. Further India had already Free trade agreements with Nepal and Bhutan and later with Sri Lanka in 1998. A bolder step was taken in 2006 when the member states signed the SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement). This was a carefully drafted agreement that factored in the differing levels of development of their members. The agreement did not result in any dramatic increase in the level of intra-SAARC trade with trade among the South Asian countries being US\$ 27 billion in 2014, that is just around 6 percent of their total external trade.^{xii} The agreement did not however result in any dramatic increase in intra-SAARC trade. Trade amongst South Asian countries with trade amongst SAARC countries being US \$ 27 billion in 2014, just about 6 percent of the total external trade.^{xiii} Low level of integration in the markets is an important reason for low level of cross border investment in the region. Thus, the main cooperative effort that has the main potential to increase economic activity in the region and contribute to poverty alleviation and people's welfare has largely not delivered the hoped outcome. Reasons for this are many. Firstly, none of the members were keen to open up their markets to even regional competition. Goods of interest to them were placed in the negative list on which duty concessions were not available. Secondly, SAARC economies being from the same agro-economic and climate zone are parallel economies, growing, producing and exporting the same or similar products. These include garments, tea, rice which are produced and exported by many members.^{xiv}

Major Challenges:

SAARC and the Indo-Pak conflict

As stated above, India was apprehensive of joining SAARC initially. First, India felt that the proposal of Bangladesh President Zia probably had an indirect Western sponsorship. This was in the context of the second cold war with the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. A South Asian regional association could be the American mechanism to counter Soviet influence. This would result in not only the incursion of external powers in the region but also an anti-Soviet and pro-US South Asian front, which would be incompatible with India's regional and broader strategic interests. Secondly, India believed that the proposed South Asian forum could be used by the smaller neighbours to put collective pressures on India on matters affecting them

collectively and individually in relation to India. Thus, in this manner the regional association would enable neighbours to, “gang up”, against India. However, India could not reject the idea and thus proposed two principles for participation. That the organisation would not discuss bilateral issues and that all the decisions would be taken on the basis of unanimity. India was of the view that bilateral stresses and strains should not impinge on regional cooperation. Further, that the objective of India was to try to pursue regional co-operation autonomously without allowing it to be subjected to the vicissitudes of bilateral co-operation. India thus approached the association with a belief that bilateral relations and regional cooperation could be completely compartmentalized. By adopting such an approach, the dynamics of the bilateral relations to influence the regional association or vice versa, of the association to influence bilaterally were being deliberately overlooked.

Even Pakistan was initially apprehensive of joining the regional association primarily for two reasons. First, that the forum would further India’s hegemonistic domination over the regions’ states in an institutionalised manner. Secondly, Pakistan was also wary of deeper involvement in the South Asian region since it would cast a doubt on the credibility and seriousness of its efforts to develop closer ties with the Islamic countries of West Asia. Pakistan finally decided to join the forum because it was unwilling to isolate itself regionally. Further, according to an observer from Pakistan, the regional advantage of participating in SAARC was that the arrangement could if the need arose, “come to deflect the weight of India” vis-a-vis its smaller South Asian partners. It was emphasised that Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal had very good, if not ideal relations with each other. However, none of the six states could be said to be enjoying tension free relations with New Delhi. Of all the differences, the Indo-Pak relations, it was stated, were not conducive to regional cooperation. It is thus evident that just as the blame for the existence of a conflictual relationship was put on India, the onus for improvement in the state of affairs was also exclusively put on New Delhi.^{xv}

There is a near unanimous consensus, amongst both scholars and general public alike, that the bitter contours of India-Pakistan relations have negatively affected the overall functioning of SAARC. The timeline of postponed or cancelled SAARC summits because of Indo-Pak rivalry since its inception is a dire testimony for the same. According to Article III of the SAARC Charter, “The Heads of State or Government shall meet once a year or more often as and when considered necessary by the Member States.” However, this provision is more honoured in its breach than in its observance. As per the reports, “SAARC has held only 18 Summits in the last 31 years since its inception in 1985.” It got outrightly cancelled in the years 1989, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016, with SAARC being in a limbo ever since. Even when the summits did take place, it did so after considerable postponements and venue changes, and in only five cases did the summit proceed as per plan.

As expected, Indo-Pak rivalry stands out as the single most determining factor in the breakdown of SAARC summits. It played the spoilsport by directly causing the cancellation of 1994-1996, 1999-2003 and 2016 summits, and the postponement of several others. In fact, the Indo-Pak factor started playing out even before the organization formally came into existence. India was suspicious of Pakistan’s ‘vested’ interest in using the platform to balance against India by aligning with other smaller neighbours in the region. Pakistan on the

other hand was equally nervous on being yet gain cornered by another of India's hegemonic designs. This caused much confusions and uncertainties, and brought considerable delay in setting the institution in place.^{xvi} The territorial disputes over Kashmir remain the most divisive issue in the sub-continent and a major source of bitterness because both the states have already fought more than three wars in 1948, 1965, and 1999 over the Kashmir issue.^{xvii}

Just a few years into its functioning, Indo-Pak ties hit a snag in early 1990s with the growing unrest in the Kashmir valley. India pointed fingers at Pakistan for 'orchestrating' the militancy while Pakistan blamed India for its 'military occupancy' of the valley. The eighth summit became a hostage to poor bilateral relations and the 1994 session at New Delhi couldn't take place. Following a brief thaw, the bilateral relations reached a new low in 1999 with the onset of the Kargil conflict and subsequent military coup in Pakistan. Eleventh summit, originally scheduled to take place in November 1999 at Kathmandu, was postponed several times, and finally took place only in January 2002 after a gap of long 42 months.

Soon following that, the 12th session scheduled to be held in Islamabad in 2003 was postponed by a year after India seemingly 'failed' to confirm its participation on time. Pakistan accused India of 'sabotaging the event and adopting devious methods to derail' the Summit. Finally, the cancellation of the 19th summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad in 2016 appeared to be the final nail in the coffin for SAARC. India steered a boycott of the summit following the terrorist attacks at Uri, for which it blamed the 'sinister' Pakistani hand behind the incident. India adhered to its policy that "terror and talks cannot go together", and as it adopts even today, indefinitely postponed the cancelled session until further notice. Even the national leaders, state diplomats and public intellectuals have publicly acknowledged the fact that Indo-Pak relations lie at the root of dysfunction of SAARC. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh AK Abdul Momen blamed India-Pakistan hostility as the main reason for the SAARC failure. Similarly, S Jaishankar, the former foreign secretary and current Minister of External Affairs of India, has termed SAARC as "jammed vehicle" and blamed Pakistan for not being on the same page as others in matters of vital interests for the region. International political analyst C Raja Mohan called Pakistan as the "camel that slowed down the pace of the South Asian caravan" and advocates the formula of "SAARC minus one" to drive the regional project forward. From the other side of the border, India is blamed for giving a "severe blow" to the process by causing arbitrary postponement. It was highlighted that at least six Summits were postponed because India refused to attend them on one pretext or another.^{xviii} In recent times, Pakistan's non-cooperation has stalled some major initiatives under SAARC. For example, despite India's keen interest in cooperating and strengthening intra-regional connectivity by backing the SAARC-MVA during the 18th summit of SAARC, the agreement was stalled following Pakistan's reluctance. Similarly, the SAARC satellite project that India proposed was abandoned following objection from Pakistan in 2016.^{xix}

Ahead of his visit to Pakistan for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Saturday criticised Pakistan for fuelling cross-border terrorism in South Asia, which he believes is the primary reason for the struggles faced by the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation (SAARC). He also cited cross-border terrorism as the key obstacle to SAARC's progress, pointing to one member state's practice of cross-border terrorism at least against one more member. While delivering the Sardar Patel Lecture on Governance organised by the IC Centre for Governance in New Delhi, S. Jaishankar said, "At the moment, SAARC is not moving forward, we haven't had a meeting of SAARC for a very simple reason; there is one member of SAARC who is practicing cross-border terrorism at least against one more member of SAARC, maybe more... Terrorism is something which is unacceptable and despite a global view of it, if one of our neighbours continues to do it, there cannot be business in SAARC. That's the reason why the SAARC meeting has not happened in recent years, but it doesn't mean that the regional activities have stopped."

Other Miscellaneous Challenges:

-India's Hegemony in the region

India's hegemonic position in South Asia has been scorned by the smaller countries. The asymmetry between India and other member countries in terms of geography, economy, military strength and influence in the global arena make the smaller countries apprehensive. They perceive India as "Big Brother" and fear that it might use the SAARC to pursue hegemony in the region.^{xx} India will use SAARC to expand its dominance in the region – such fears have been in the minds of SAARC's small states since the first. 'Indian hegemonic design, mistrust and bad attitude towards the smaller states of South Asia hamper all the efforts for greater regional integration.' Moreover, through SAARC, among the people of different countries in the South Asian region increased cooperation will lead to the expansion of democratic thinking in those countries. This could lead to mass protests the authoritarian rulers of those countries. This apprehension, in their opinion, has created a negative attitude towards India. Therefore, some of the neighbouring countries with the help of foreign states have devoted themselves to reducing India's influence in the South Asian region. The smaller neighbouring countries, therefore, have been reluctant to implement various agreements under SAARC.^{xxi}

-The China Factor

In this context, we can also mention the increasing influence of China in the South Asian Region which is also striving for a full membership in SAARC. It is already an observer member of SAARC. There has been an increasing debate on whether China should be given membership of SAARC. Several SAARC countries have supported full membership of China including its ally Pakistan. One group argues in favour, on the grounds that China is geographically close to South Asia, sharing borders with India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bhutan. As an observer member, it has contributed significantly to the progress of SAARC in several ways and the profile of SAARC will be enhanced in the international political economy if the association comprises both India and China, being the world's fastest growing economies, most populous

countries and significant players in global politics, economics and security affairs. Furthermore, it has overwhelming support from Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka for obtaining membership. At successive SAARC summits, these countries have strongly and consistently pitched for a rising profile for China in SAARC from an “Observer member” to “Dialogue Partner.” The main intentions of these countries favouring China is to limit India’s dominance in the region, as the former can be a counterweight to India’s power within the structure and also to benefit from its economic, political and military engagement with China. China is a rising economic player in the region and it seeks to expand its role even more through full membership to counter the influence and dominance of India.^{xxii}

On the other hand, the arguments opposing China’s SAARC membership run along the following lines. First, SAARC is already affected by the shadow of the India-Pakistan fault line. For example, SAARC is the least economically integrated region: the intra-regional SAARC trade is less than 5 per cent of SAARC worldwide trade.^{xxiii} Thus, many argue that inclusion of China will create another shadow of the India-China fault line, leading to nominal trade. Subsequently, SAARC is already a complicated forum, and could get further complicated with the inclusion of China. Second, China is an undemocratic country, which has been seriously criticised by the international community for its human rights record. But this argument falls flat on its face, as most of the South Asian countries are fragile democracies, with some of them being strongly inclined to military rule like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Third, China has close ties with SAARC countries in all realms, which will facilitate its domination of the organisation. The China-Pakistan “all-weather friendship” would further undermine India’s profile in SAARC. Fourth, China can meaningfully engage with SAARC even without full membership. For example, ASEAN has strong economic ties with China but China still remains a non-member. Fifth, it is also argued that China’s entry will undermine India’s influence/dominance in SAARC, like it has successfully done to Russia in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Thus, SAARC can adopt the same pattern. Sixth, another strong argument has been that China will work towards curtailing India’s interest. For example, China has consistently tried to block India’s entry into several forums in the Asian region, such as ASEAN, ASEAN Region Forum (ARF) and East Asian Summit (EAS). But many argue that in SAARC, decisions are based on unanimity, so India still can veto China entry. Moreover, China invited India to participate in Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in 2014 and has been supporting India in deepening its partnership with the SCO. At the same time, India could not prevent China’s entry as observer member, as India wanted Afghanistan to be a SAARC member. Pakistan was opposed to Afghanistan’s entry; hence, as a tactical compromise, India had to allow China’s observer membership in SAARC.^{xxiv}

-Divergence from Multilateralism to Bilateralism

Apart from this, SAARC does not have any arrangement for resolving disputes or mediating conflicts. Disputes among the member countries often hamper consensus building, thus slowing down the decision-making process. SAARC’s inability in this regard has been detrimental to its growth. Given SAARC’s failures, member countries have turned to bilateralism, which in turn has adversely affected the organisation. Bilateralism is an easier option since it calls for dealings between only two countries, whereas SAARC at a

regional level requires one country to deal with seven countries. Thus, bilateralism decreases the countries' dependence on SAARC to achieve their objectives, making them less interested in pursuing initiatives at a regional level.^{xxv} Interestingly, Article 10 (2) of the SAARC charter excludes bilateral and contentious issues from any discussion. But India apprehended that the small neighbouring states could unite in the SAARC forum and form an alliance against India. This is because almost every state in the region has problems in its bilateral relations with India. As for example, the following disputes can be mentioned between India and Pakistan focusing on Kashmir, between India and Bangladesh focusing on the distribution of water in the Ganges, between India and Nepal focusing on the water distribution of Mahakali River and in some recently disputed border regions like Kalapani, Lipulekh, etc. Moreover, we can mention the dispute between India and Sri Lanka over India's views on Sri Lankan ethnicity. Due to the special importance of bilateral and conflicting issues, the bond of cooperation between the SAARC countries could not be strengthened.^{xxvi}

Conclusion

To sum up, despite having immense potential for development, South Asia remains one of the most backward regions in the world. Serious socioeconomic issues plague the region, including poverty, illiteracy, inequality, unemployment and malnutrition. Since the formation of SAARC in December 1985, member states have not been able to strengthen their economic ties so that they could work together towards the development of the region. Their attempts at collaboration on developing their industrial and social sectors, better connectivity and encouraging higher levels of investments have remained lacklustre and weak. The region is also rife with issues of national identity and internal consolidation that have caused political tensions and mistrust among member countries.^{xxvii} However, we cannot outrightly reject the achievements of SAARC in its long journey so far. As a regional organization, it has been a platform for dialogue and discussions amongst the South Asian nations though the outcomes did not bear fruit. The Kashmir issue and cross-border terrorism remains the major bone of contention between the two nations. Initiatives like SAFTA and SAPTA were commendable steps taken on behalf of this organization though they achieved limited success. Recently, India's announcement of Neighbourhood First Policy was directed towards India's friendly relations towards its South Asian neighbours. India during Coronavirus atmosphere around the whole world tried to stand by the side of the South Asian countries as much as possible and tried to bring back its lost glory by giving strong leadership to this opportunity in containing the spread of the deadly virus. With the advent of Covid19 pandemic in SAARC countries, Narendra Modi convened a video conference of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) states to collectively fight against the threat of COVID-19; this venture could also be viewed as a good attempt to combat China's increasing influence in the area by rejuvenating India's leadership in SAARC states.^{xxviii}

However, sweeping away all generalizations, a closer scrutiny illustrates that SAARC has not been able to accomplish the desired outcomes as a regional organization as against other regional organizations like ASEAN, EU, NAFTA and so on. Ironical to say, that as one of the biggest regional organizations, it is in a state of flux. Despite transcending similarity amongst the South Asian Nations in historical and cultural terms

and geographical contiguity of the nations, it has been rightly argued South Asia qualifies as a region only in institutional terms. As put forth by one of the noted scholars, it is indeed a “region without regionalism”. The lack of political will among members to make SAARC a dynamic grouping has been evident since its inception. Considering the limitations of SAARC especially due to the India-Pakistan stalemate over different issues, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has gained more favour as the preferred platform for regional cooperation in South Asia. After India hosted a mini summit during the BRICS meeting in Goa in 2016, support for BIMSTEC gained further momentum. Indian Government divergence from the SAARC to BIMSTEC stands as a clear example. It has been rightly argued by the scholars that to make SAARC more effective, the organisation must be reformed, and member countries must reach a consensus regarding the changes required. However, considering the differences that exist among the members, particularly between India and Pakistan, such a consensus will be difficult to reach. Until the member countries resolve their issues, the future of SAARC remains uncertain.

xxix

A lot of research has been conducted on this issue and so has been argued by different scholars that only if multilateralism takes precedence over bilateralism to resolve their contentious issues, SAARC as a regional organization will be able to sustain itself and flourish. The long-standing disputes especially the India-Pakistan conflict remains a major bone of contention. It has been rightly acknowledged the fact that bitter Indo-Pak relations lie at the root of dysfunction of SAARC. The long-standing rift between India and Pakistan has directly affected its functioning. To sum up, the journey of this organization has been a roller coaster ride since the very inception. It is imperative to settle regional disputes through dialogue and discussions. There should be regular summits and meetings of the SAARC nations for its effective functioning. Political will of the SAARC members is the prime requirement in establishing peaceful co-existence and building interdependence mutually amongst them at the times of need. More importantly, the dominant players should take a lead in that direction.

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