

SAARC: Problems of Regional Cooperation

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an intergovernmental organization comprising seven countries in South Asia: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. SAARC was established with the objective of promoting peace, freedom, social justice, and economic prosperity in the region through mutual understanding, good neighborly relations, and meaningful cooperation among its member states.

The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first proposed in November 1980. Subsequently, the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries met in Colombo in April 1981, followed by a meeting of the Committee of the Whole a few months later. During these meetings, five broad areas for regional cooperation were identified, including agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, and health and population. Later on, scientific and technological cooperation, sports, arts, and culture were added to the areas of cooperation.

The Foreign Ministers of the member states convened in New Delhi in August 1983 and adopted the Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation, formally launching the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) in the agreed areas of cooperation. Finally, the Heads of State or Government of the member countries held the first SAARC Summit in Dhaka on December 7-8, 1985, where they adopted the charter, formally establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Why do we need regional cooperation in South Asia ?

Regional cooperation in South Asia, represented by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), plays a pivotal role in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the region. South Asian nations have a shared history of being victims of imperialism, followed by their individual journeys towards independence. However, common issues persist, including widespread poverty, high illiteracy rates, economic backwardness, rampant unemployment, and significant economic inequalities. These challenges require collaborative efforts and joint initiatives.

Regional cooperation is particularly essential due to the mutual interdependence among South Asian countries. None of the nations in the region can be entirely self-reliant in meeting the diverse needs of their citizens. As a result, they often have to rely on each other for resources, trade, and various forms of cooperation. By fostering coordination in trade, industry, agriculture, and socio-economic development, these countries can address their limitations and work towards achieving sustainable economic growth, improved living standards, and enhanced employment opportunities for their populations.

Moreover, regional cooperation contributes to the establishment and maintenance of peace, stability, and security in South Asia. The region has a history of conflicts and tensions among its nations, which can hinder progress and hinder prosperity. SAARC serves as a platform for dialogue, trust-building,

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and conflict resolution, allowing member states to address disputes and disagreements through peaceful means. By promoting good neighborly relations and fostering understanding, SAARC aims to create an environment conducive to cooperation and mutual respect.

Cultural exchange and social integration are also significant outcomes of regional cooperation. South Asia is a diverse region, rich in cultures, traditions, and languages. Through interaction and collaboration, member states can promote cultural exchange, appreciation for shared heritage, and understanding of different perspectives. This helps build social cohesion, harmony, and a sense of belonging among the people of the region.

Furthermore, regional cooperation enables South Asian countries to collectively address transnational issues that affect the entire region. These issues include terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, climate change, natural disasters, and public health challenges. By pooling resources, sharing intelligence, and adopting common strategies, the member states can effectively combat these challenges. Cooperation also facilitates the exchange of best practices, knowledge, and technological advancements, enabling more efficient responses to transnational issues.

Therefore, regional cooperation in South Asia through organizations like SAARC is imperative for addressing the economic, social, and cultural challenges faced by the member states. By leveraging their collective strength, resources, and expertise, these countries can achieve more significant progress in areas such as economic development, poverty alleviation, social integration, and peacebuilding. Through mutual cooperation, South Asian nations can work together towards a more prosperous, harmonious, and secure future for the region and its people.

The step towards regional cooperation

SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has taken several steps towards regional cooperation since its establishment. Here are some of the key initiatives and steps taken by SAARC:

- **Integrated Programme of Action (IPA):** SAARC launched the Integrated Programme of Action in 1983, initially focusing on five areas of cooperation: agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, and health and population. Later, scientific and technological cooperation, sports, arts, and culture were added to the areas of cooperation. The IPA provided a framework for member states to collaborate and implement joint projects in these sectors.
- **SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area):** SAFTA was established with the signing of an agreement in 2004 and came into effect on January 1, 2006. It aims to promote trade liberalization and economic integration among the member states. SAFTA aims to reduce tariffs, barriers, and other trade restrictions to enhance intra-regional trade and economic cooperation. It provides a framework for trade negotiations, tariff concessions, and dispute settlement mechanisms among member countries.
- **SAARC Development Fund (SDF):** The SAARC Development Fund was established in 2010 to promote regional development projects and economic cooperation within the SAARC region. The SDF provides financial support for infrastructure development, social projects, and other initiatives that contribute to the economic growth and welfare of the member states.
- **SAARC Energy Ring:** The SAARC Energy Ring initiative aims to promote regional cooperation in the energy sector. It focuses on the development and sharing of energy resources, including electricity, gas, and renewable energy sources. The energy ring envisions the establishment of

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cross-border transmission networks, energy trade, and cooperation in energy conservation and efficiency.

- **SAARC Cultural Centre:** The SAARC Cultural Centre was established in Sri Lanka in 2009 to promote cultural exchange and understanding among member states. It organizes cultural events, exhibitions, and festivals to showcase the diverse cultural heritage of South Asia. The center aims to strengthen cultural ties and foster people-to-people interactions among the member countries.
- **SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC):** The SDMC was established in India in 2006 to enhance regional cooperation in disaster management and emergency response. It facilitates the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and resources among member states to mitigate the impact of natural disasters and coordinate disaster response efforts.

These are some of the key steps and initiatives taken by SAARC towards regional cooperation. While progress has been made in various areas, the level of cooperation and implementation has varied over time due to geopolitical challenges, bilateral tensions, and other factors. However, SAARC continues to provide a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and collective efforts to address common challenges and promote regional cooperation in South Asia.

Challenges to Regional Cooperation

Challenges to regional cooperation in SAARC can be categorized into various aspects:

1. **Domestic Constraints:** Each South Asian country faces its own set of domestic challenges, such as poverty, underdevelopment, national identity issues, and political order. These challenges can hinder the establishment of cross-border regional institutions and processes. The emphasis on state sovereignty and exclusive national identities can sometimes overshadow the need for cross-border interaction and regional cooperation.
2. **Diversities in Political Systems:** South Asian countries have diverse political systems, ranging from democracies to monarchies and theocracies. The differences in governance models and political stability among member states can affect the effectiveness of regional cooperation. Unstable governments and political uncertainties hinder the successful implementation of cooperative initiatives.
3. **Long-Standing Disputes:** Long-standing disputes between member states have been a major hindrance to regional cooperation. Disputes such as the Tamil issue between India and Sri Lanka, the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan, and boundary disputes and migration challenges between India and Bangladesh negatively impact the relations and cooperation among South Asian nations.
4. **Economic Competition:** Economic competition between member states can sometimes undermine regional cooperation. In sectors such as tea trade, jute trade, and textile industries, there is competition between countries like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Economic rivalries can hinder collective efforts towards economic development and integration.
5. **Problems of Minorities:** South Asian countries have diverse societies with significant minority populations. Issues related to minority rights, security, and separatist demands can create tensions and disrupt regional cooperation. Ensuring equal rights and addressing the concerns of minority communities is crucial for building trust and fostering cooperation.

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6. **Terrorism:** Terrorism has emerged as a significant threat to the South Asian region. The presence of terrorist organizations and extremist ideologies poses a challenge to peace, stability, and regional cooperation. Combating terrorism requires collective efforts, intelligence sharing, and coordinated strategies among member states.
7. **Lack of Trust:** Lack of trust among member countries, particularly between India and Pakistan, has been a major obstacle to regional cooperation. Instances of non-cooperation and reluctance to participate in joint initiatives have stalled progress. Building trust and confidence among member states is crucial for fostering meaningful cooperation.
8. **Irregular Summits:** The irregularity of SAARC summits is another challenge. According to the SAARC Charter, summits should be held annually, but in practice, there have been significant gaps between summits. Factors such as internal situations of member countries, bilateral tensions, and non-participation of certain members have resulted in the postponement or cancellation of summits, hindering the progress of regional cooperation.

Future Directions

To shape the future of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) in more detail, several specific directions can be pursued to enhance regional cooperation and address the challenges faced by the member states.

Firstly, building trust and confidence among member states is crucial. This can be achieved through sustained dialogue and diplomatic engagements, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding and respect. Confidence-building measures should be prioritized, including the establishment of joint initiatives, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people interactions. Regular high-level visits, cultural festivals, and sports events can help foster positive sentiments and build trust among the member states.

Secondly, enhancing economic cooperation is imperative for regional development. Member states should work towards reducing trade barriers and promoting intra-regional trade. Efforts should be made to simplify customs procedures, harmonize regulations, and establish efficient trade facilitation mechanisms. SAARC should explore ways to expand the coverage and depth of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area), ensuring effective implementation and addressing any obstacles that hinder trade integration. Joint investment projects, business forums, and technology transfers can also promote economic collaboration among the member states.

Infrastructure development and improved connectivity are essential for regional integration. SAARC should prioritize the development of physical and digital infrastructure to enhance connectivity within the region. This includes the construction of transport corridors, road networks, rail links, and the establishment of efficient cross-border logistics and customs systems. Emphasis should also be placed on digital connectivity, including the expansion of high-speed internet access and the promotion of e-commerce platforms to facilitate digital trade and cross-border transactions.

Sectoral collaboration holds great potential for regional cooperation. SAARC member states can explore partnerships and joint projects in key sectors such as agriculture, energy, tourism, healthcare, education, and disaster management. Collaborative efforts can involve sharing best practices, technology transfers, capacity building programs, and joint research initiatives to address common challenges and achieve sustainable development goals. Special focus should be placed on promoting sustainable agriculture practices, renewable energy sources, responsible tourism, and disaster preparedness and response mechanisms.

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Promoting people-to-people exchanges and cultural cooperation is essential for fostering regional understanding and integration. SAARC can facilitate academic exchanges, cultural festivals, sports events, and youth programs to promote interaction and appreciation of the region's rich cultural diversity. Cultural cooperation can strengthen social bonds, enhance tourism, and foster a shared regional identity. Scholarships, educational exchanges, and joint research programs can further encourage collaboration and mutual learning among the academic and intellectual communities of the member states.

Addressing transnational challenges requires collective efforts. SAARC should prioritize cooperation in intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, disaster response mechanisms, and the exchange of best practices. Collaborative efforts can enhance regional security, resilience, and preparedness to counter terrorism, combat climate change, respond to natural disasters, and address public health emergencies.

Strengthening the institutional mechanisms of SAARC is crucial for effective decision-making and implementation. The SAARC Secretariat should be empowered with more resources, authority, and technical expertise to coordinate and monitor regional initiatives. Regular summits, ministerial meetings, and technical working groups should be held to review progress, address implementation challenges, and provide a platform for open and constructive dialogue among the member states.

Engaging civil society organizations, academia, business communities, and other stakeholders is vital for inclusive regional cooperation. SAARC should create platforms for regular dialogue, consultations, and participation of non-state actors. This will ensure that the voices and perspectives of diverse groups are considered in the decision-making processes of SAARC. Public-private partnerships, business forums, and academic collaborations can further contribute to the success of regional initiatives.

By pursuing these detailed directions, SAARC can lay the foundation for a more integrated, prosperous, and harmonious South Asian region. Continuous efforts, commitment, and cooperation among member states are essential to overcome challenges, build trust, and achieve the vision of a stronger and more interconnected South Asia.

Conclusion

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) plays a vital role in fostering regional cooperation among its member states. The need for regional cooperation in South Asia arises from the shared challenges of poverty, underdevelopment, political order, and national integration. Despite the significant potential for cooperation, several challenges hinder progress.

These challenges include domestic constraints, diversities in political systems, long-standing disputes, economic competition, minority issues, terrorism, lack of trust, and irregularities in summits. However, the future directions for SAARC outlined in the conversation provide a roadmap for overcoming these challenges and strengthening regional cooperation.

By building trust and confidence among member states, enhancing economic cooperation, developing infrastructure and connectivity, promoting sectoral collaboration, facilitating people-to-people exchanges, addressing transnational challenges, strengthening institutional mechanisms, and engaging civil society, SAARC can shape a more integrated, prosperous, and harmonious South Asian region.

Efforts towards regional cooperation must prioritize inclusive decision-making processes and participation from diverse stakeholders. Regular dialogue, diplomatic engagements, and cultural

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exchanges can foster understanding and forge stronger bonds among the member states. Collaboration in sectors such as agriculture, energy, tourism, healthcare, education, and disaster management can drive sustainable development and shared prosperity.

Addressing long-standing disputes and bilateral tensions through dialogue and negotiations is crucial for creating an environment conducive to regional cooperation. Additionally, concerted efforts are required to combat transnational challenges such as terrorism, climate change, natural disasters, and public health emergencies, with intelligence sharing, joint training, and collective response mechanisms.

Strengthening the institutional mechanisms of SAARC, including the SAARC Secretariat, is vital to ensure effective decision-making, implementation, and coordination among member states. Regular summits and meetings should be held to review progress and address implementation challenges.

In conclusion, SAARC has the potential to shape a brighter future for South Asia by addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities for regional cooperation. Through sustained efforts, commitment, and cooperation among member states, SAARC can foster greater integration, sustainable development, and enhanced well-being for the people of South Asia.

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