

SAARC and Beyond: Pakistan's Endeavors to Enhance South Asian Unity and Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

A number of factors contributed to the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation's (SAARC) establishment being postponed until 1985, including the lingering effects of South Asia's colonial past, unchecked migration across fragile, porous, and unsettled borders, ethnic and religious differences, intraregional economic disparities, and the ensuing bilateral disputes (Tonnesson, 2004). The foundation of the South Asian grouping known as SAARC was facilitated by the abundance of human and material resources along with other shared characteristics including geographic closeness, historical origins, and similarity of social and political development standards. The development of political, economic, and social contact, as well as a shared vision for using the region's potential and interdependence to confront challenges, were the primary motivations for the founding of SAARC, it is vital to mention.

SAARC was founded with the goal of enhancing interregional cooperation. Prior to the formation of SAARC, the issue of regional cooperation was brought up in a number of conferences. It mainly consisted of four stages of evolution: conception, the meeting of foreign secretaries, the meeting of foreign secretaries, and summits (Malik, 1993). Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were among its seven original members. Afghanistan joined the group in 2007 (Shaheen, 2013).

Objectives of SAARC

In this case, the formation of a regional organisation like SAARC served as a forum to talk about topics of shared interest. Enhancing the socioeconomic and cultural growth of South Asian states via economic cooperation is the primary goal of SAARC (Grover, 1997). Mutual respect for one another's sovereignty, integrity, and independence serves as the cornerstone of this SAARC countries collaboration. In conclusion, the standard is non-interference in the internal affairs of other member nations. Due to this, controversial bilateral matters are not permitted in SAARC discussions. The following goals are included in the SAARC charter as this association's goals (SAARC Secretariat):

1. To increase and strengthen South Asia's independence
2. Reduce the lack of trust between member states
3. Promote cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, and other spheres
4. Advance a cause of shared interest in international forums
5. Streamline relations with other regional and global organisations

As a result, SAARC identified a number of potential areas for collaboration in a variety of industries, including agriculture and rural development, science and technology, meteorology, transport, telecommunications, biotechnology, environment, energy, women and children, health, education, arts, culture, and sports, as well as intellectual property rights, among others. In the past,

SAARC made significant strides in economic and commercial integration. For instance, accords like the South Asian Preferential Commerce Agreement 1993 (SAPTA) and South Asian Free Trade Area 2004 (SAFTA) have been reached with the goal of promoting and facilitating commerce as well as mutual economic growth (Rafiq, 2018). Due to the sluggish intra-South Asian commerce. Although bilateral and contentious matters were meant to be excluded from the SAARC members collaboration, it is these that have prevented SAARC meetings from moving forward (Yahya, 2004).

Pakistan's Membership in SAARC

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, envisioned Pakistan as a state built on the ideals of a single people, language, and culture (Jaffrelot, 2002). Given Pakistan's ethnic variety, the creation of a Muslim state was the primary tactic employed to bridge ethnic divides. The pluralistic makeup of Pakistani society was first resisted by various governments, who have not consistently adopted this strategy. The government might have governed the multicultural and ethnically diverse society of Pakistan more effectively (Malik, 1997).

There is no denying that Pakistan joined the SAARC in 1985 with the explicit intention of using the group as a forum to mobilise the smaller states in the area against India. In fact, when President Rahman of Bangladesh asked Pakistan to join the organisation, there were heated discussions on whether this would jeopardise Pakistan's principal objective of solidifying its position as a 'West Asian' and 'Islamic' nation with strong ties to the Arab world. It believed that by participating in the conference, it might stop India from establishing 'a hegemonistic role' in the area (Nanda, 2016).

Pakistan's Involvement in SAARC

- In May 1986, Pakistan held a ministerial-level conference on international affairs in Islamabad.
- Pakistan recommended that women take part in SAARC-related events.
- To increase its share of South Asian food security resources from 19100 tonnes, Pakistan has organised a large number of initiatives under the IPA.
- Pakistan is the second-largest donor to the budget for the SAARC secretariat as well as to all SAARC-related activities.
- Pakistan gave the elimination of drug misuse and

trafficking through effective regional cooperation the highest priority (Umar, 2014).

Pakistan has taken the initiative within SAARC to transform it into a prime example of regional cooperation based on the ideas of sovereign equality. The fourth and twelfth SAARC Summits were held in Pakistan, respectively, in 1988 and 2004 (Abdin, 2010). The fourth summit announced 1989 to be the 'SAARC Year against Drug Abuse'. In addition, it declared 1990 to be 'SAARC Year of the Girl Child'. One of the most fruitful gatherings of the South Asian nations was the SAARC's 12th summit. Pakistan has made significant efforts throughout the years to further the SAARC's ideas and goals (Arif, 2018).

Pakistan took up the duties of SAARC's Secretary General in February 2017. Amjad Husain B. Sail, a former Pakistani ambassador to Tajikistan, has been named the organization's new secretary general. India attempted to obstruct his appointment by claiming that Pakistan supports terrorism. India later approved the appointment. There are several difficulties Pakistan is dealing with. These included setting up the 19th SAARC summit as soon as feasible in Pakistan to restart the SAARC process as a whole. In addition, Pakistan should collaborate with other regional nations to reactivate the SAARC structure. The appointment of a seasoned diplomat can aid in reviving and bolstering the SAARC. Pakistan places a high value on regional integration, and SAARC offers that since it promotes and enhances social growth, economic stability, cultural development, and the welfare of South Asians (Arif, 2017).

Effects of SAARC Summit Cancellation on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The isolation of Pakistan on both a regional and an international level is growing worse over time. The SAARC Summit's cancellation, which was scheduled to take place in Pakistan in November 2016. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan have formally announced their resignation from the SAARC Summit in conjunction with India's withdrawal (Khasru, 2016). The SAARC summit conference's cancellation by five countries, which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan, highlights that nation's isolation from the rest of the region. Some detractors view Pakistan's foreign policy and diplomacy as failing as a result of the SAARC Summit's cancellation. They contend that if India could influence the states in the area and include them in achieving its goals, why can't

Pakistan? (Rehman, 2016).

Another area where Pakistan's foreign policy apparatus failed to gain the confidence of the neighbouring nations was the abolition of SAARC. Increasing friendly states and decreasing opponents is one of the main objectives of foreign policy. Pakistan has gained more enemies than allies and lost friends in the process. With the exception of China, Pakistan's ties with its neighbours have gotten worse with each passing day. Pakistan's foreign policy decision-makers failed to preserve cordial bilateral relations with Bangladesh, Iran, and Afghanistan whereas India was successful in winning over these nations (Yousaf and others, 2017). Pakistan experiences regional aloofness as a result of its neighbours avoiding it. In order to understand the significance of Gwadar Port, India, Iran, and Afghanistan are working on Chahbahar Port. In addition, SAARC sub-regional blocs like Bimstec and SASEC, which are composed of SAARC members with the exception of Pakistan and Afghanistan, have been established (Khasru, 2016).

On the other hand, Sartaj Aziz, the advisor to the prime minister on foreign affairs, asserted that a realistic evaluation of the current situation should reject the notion that Pakistan is regionally isolated and that its foreign policy has failed. He used the Pak-China Strategic Partnership, notably CPEC, as an example of Pakistan's enormous foreign policy achievement. Additionally, the TAPI Gas Pipeline, the Casa-1000 Power Plan, and Pakistan's membership in the largest regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, are notable instances of Pakistan's effective foreign policy. Strategic cooperation with the US, improved commercial and economic links with Russia, the European Union, and Middle Eastern countries are some of Pakistan's significant foreign policy achievements (Aziz, 2016).

Challenges for SAARC's Effectiveness

It is crucial to note that SAARC does confront some significant challenges to success. The bilateral conflicts among the SAARC's members are the cause of a variety of challenges. There are several significant obstacles that, without a doubt, prevent South Asian cooperation from growing. Interstate Conflicts in South Asia, Fear of Indian Dominance, Civilizational Conflicts, Unstable Financial Positions, Lack of Trust Among Member Countries, Divergent Political Systems, etc. are a few of these obstacles (Weerakoon and Jayauriya, 2002). The personnel of the SAARC Secretariat, according to some

scholars conducting in-depth study on South Asian regionalism, appears to be a hindrance in certain ways to implementing the policies thought to be necessary for regional integration. The SAARC Secretariat employs a consensus-based method of operation. The Directors of Working Divisions in particular do not support an effort supported by the SAARC Secretariat because it can conflict with a specific policy that has been taken by their individual nations (K.D.A., 1944).

Frequently, bilateral disputes have forced SAARC to postpone its annual summit meetings and delay the implementation of certain of its initiatives rather than all of them. Due to the Sri Lanka-Indian war, which was still going on at the time, the 1989 SAARC Summit was cancelled. Similarly, the post-Kargil event in ties between Pakistan and India caused the 11th SAARC Summit to be postponed from 1999 to 2002. Additionally, due to Indian accusations that Pakistan was funding cross-border terrorism, the 12th SAARC Summit was also postponed from 2003 to 2004. As anticipated, the Indo-Pak rivalry comes out as the single most important determining factor in how SAARC summits turned out. It acted as a spoilsport by directly leading to the postponing of several summits as well as the cancellation of the 1994–1996, 1999–2003, and 2016 summits. In actuality, the Indo-Pak factor began to manifest itself long before the organisation was legally established. Early in the 1990s, only a few years into its operation, rising turmoil in the Kashmir valley caused Indo-Pak relations to deteriorate. Pakistan was accused by India of orchestrating the militancy, while Pakistan accused India of occupying the valley militarily.

Even state diplomats, national leaders, and intellectuals have publicly stated that SAARC's problems are mostly due to the dysfunction of Indo-Pak ties. SAARC's lack of progress has been attributed to the animosity between India and Pakistan, according to Bangladesh's Minister of Foreign Affairs, AK Abdul Momen. International political expert C Raja Mohan suggests using the formula 'SAARC minus one' to advance the regional agenda and refers to Pakistan as the camel that hindered the South Asian caravan's speed. On the other side of the border, India is accused of creating an 'arbitrary postponement' that dealt a severe blow to the process. They point out that at least six summits were postponed as a result of India's refusal to attend them under various pretexts (Ahmad, 2017).

Conclusion

Since its foundation, SAARC has been essential in advancing relations between India and Pakistan. It has provided a forum for the leaders of the two nations to regularly meet, start a discourse, look for solutions, and get beyond problems (Naazer, 2018). Such summit diplomacy between the heads of countries revitalises bilateral ties and establishes a top-to-bottom framework for both diplomatic establishments to operate within. The SAARC framework for regional economic cooperation in South Asia and bilateral economic collaboration between Pakistan and India are two sides of the same coin. Both are connected to the extent that they are mutually beneficial.

Additionally, there are higher chances for Pakistan-Indian economic collaboration to increase regional cooperation at the SAARC level. Additionally, improved economic ties between Pakistan and India will strengthen South Asia's standing in the global economy. It appears hard to resuscitate SAARC in the wake of recent events like the Uri incident and cancellation of the 19th SAARC conference. There are, however, a few ways Pakistan might still contribute to the success and vitality of SAARC. Although SAARC cannot compel its member nations to engage in intra-regional commerce, it may provide a portfolio of opportunities for them to do so. State cooperation in the region is also crucial. Both India and Pakistan should put their political differences aside in the current context and work towards mutual collaboration. Members of SAARC must deal head-on with bilateral, difficult matters rather than brushing them under the rug.

There will be a significant role for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Strong regional linkages between the SAARC nations would provide commercial prospects and contribute to raising the general public's level of living. Pakistan has a chance to engage with neighbouring nations through the CPEC. India objected to China's entrance into SAARC during the Kathmandu summit in 2014 since China's quest for complete SAARC membership undermines India's hegemony. Since China's worldwide economic dominance may help provide the organisation the boost it needs, China's admission to SAARC as a full member can offer the organisation the required push to develop as a regional bloc. Pakistan was anticipated to reiterate its demand that Beijing be given full membership in SAARC during the summit in 2016. Pakistan must now take on a bigger

role. Pakistan bears the enormous duty of making sure that all members are on board and transforming SAARC into a strong, resilient regional force, so that the actions of one nation should not have an impact on the organisation as a whole.

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