



IS SAARC DEAD?

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985¹ with great fanfare and high expectations for regional cooperation and connectivity,² has fallen into limbo since 2015 when India refused to attend the SAARC Summit³ under Pakistan's Chair.⁴ SAARC was launched with the vision to advance cooperation by replacing contradictions, dispel lack of trust with interconnectedness, and eliminate poverty in the region through economic integration that got hampered by the overarching influence of India in the region.⁵ Despite almost four decades since its inception, SAARC has failed to achieve its policy initiatives and objectives. Regional cooperation is often facilitated by an environment of peace and stability, and willingness to coordinate and accommodate each other within an organization.⁶ On the other hand, mistrust and tensions create hindrances to cooperation, as has been the case in the context of SAARC. India, the largest member and the only one that shares borders with all SAARC members except Afghanistan, has played a manipulative role to impose its hegemony within SAARC. Pakistan, on the other hand, has worked to strengthen SAARC as a platform of regional cooperation, trade and connectivity.



The annual SAARC summit provides a valuable platform for South Asian leaders to exchange views on areas of regional connectivity, address variations, negotiate when required on common concerns, and formalize agreements as a symbol of collective cooperation. While all members adhere to the understanding not to discuss contentious bilateral issues, the Summit provides opportunities for side-line meetings or at the Retreat⁷ to create personal rapport and understanding that eventually help to resolve or at least to discuss differences/contentious issues such as the Kashmir dispute. Article III of the SAARC Charter stipulates regular meetings of the Heads of the states and governments and all decisions based on consensus.⁸ However, the SAARC leaders have failed to host a summit time and again. The Summit meetings have had to be invariably postponed because of India's refusal to attend on one pretext or the other.⁹ The 19th SAARC Summit in Islamabad under Pakistan's Chairmanship in November 2016 has not been held so far due to India's brinkmanship. India used the Uri and Pulwama incidents as an excuse to accuse Pakistan of terrorism and refused to participate in the SAARC Summit.¹⁰ Other SAARC members, who are woefully dependent on India's goodwill, dare not voice any objections; rather, they have towed India's excuses in favour of postponement.¹¹

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The SAARC story of 38 years shows that the regional organization has faced many setbacks, as is evident from frequent Summit postponements and failure of SAFTA and other collaborative mechanisms. The underlying factor, however, has been the hostile relations between Pakistan and India. Many analysts in the SAARC member countries have talked about the possible or imminent demise of SAARC. Other than the icy bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, the Indian media cite factors such as political chaos, extremism, insurgencies, economic recession, etc., to have contributed to lethargic regional cooperation and irregularity in SAARC Summit.¹² It has been said time and again that South Asia is the least integrated region in the world.¹³

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It should be remembered that SAARC members did make substantial efforts to enhance economic and commercial connectivity and social development within the region, as shown by SAARC Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA).¹⁴ SAPTA failed to resolve trade disputes between India and other SAARC nations.¹⁵ Its successor, South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), launched in 2004,¹⁶ was also unable to achieve success due to persistent tensions in the region. This is evident from its diminishing scope as it got reduced to only focusing on intraregional trade neglecting interregional aspect of economic cooperation with other regional nations.¹⁷

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So, should one conclude that SAARC is dead, or can it still be revived? The spirit of engagement and cooperation at the heart of SAARC has gone amiss. India, the largest SAARC member, is no longer interested in South Asian regional cooperation. India has lured SAARC members other than Pakistan into multilateral fora such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). India has distanced itself from SAARC, primarily because it wanted to isolate Pakistan within the region. Also, it does not want to be associated with smaller regional powers. With its global aspirations, India perceives itself in the league of major powers of the world. The US-India strategic partnership, where the United States considers India as a central actor in its strategy to contain China, has further boosted India's sense of being a major power.

For the present, SAARC is on a ventilator, notwithstanding Pakistan's willingness to revive it. Pakistan has yet to assume its Chairmanship since 2015. Its efforts remain limited to expressions of intent. Thus revival of SAARC appears unlikely as long as relations between India and Pakistan are not normalized. If in some distant future, their bilateral relations move towards normalization, it may inject hope for regional cooperation in South Asia under the SAARC mechanism. In the meantime, Pakistan can request Nepal, the current SAARC Chairman, to call for meetings on urgent and pressing issues such as Climate Change that require regional cooperation among SAARC member countries. SAARC Art and Culture Festival is another event that can bring SAARC members on a platform of the least common denominator. However, there are very slim chances of India's acceptance of Nepal's proposals. Well, if it does not, Pakistan having tried several times before to bring SAARC together, gave it another try.

National interests of a country are the driving force underpinning its relations with other countries. When SAARC was launched, it was envisaged as a program that would promote regional integration on lines similar to ASEAN and the EU. However, even after 38 years, multitudes of meetings and institutional mechanisms, SAARC has not been allowed to contribute much to promote inter-regional trade and integration due to enduring conflicts in South Asia. Just as other countries, Pakistan has explored other regional organizations and international fora such as ECO, D8, and SCO. In keeping with the National Security Policy's vision of geo-economic development, Pakistan is looking to create its own paradigm for regional trade, cooperation and connectivity with countries in its western neighbourhood. That does not foreclose Pakistan's interest in regional cooperation in South Asia within the SAARC ambit. Pakistan would be willing to revive SAARC under its Chairmanship when that happens in the near or distant future.

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