



UNVEILING THE SAARC: A CASE OF POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Dr. Saira Akram

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email ID: saira.akram29@yahoo.com

Dr. Sobia Riaz

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email ID: goshisobia@yahoo.com

Dr. Noraiz Arshad

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email ID: noraizarshad@bzu.edu.pk

Muhammad Aqeel

Corresponding Author

PhD Scholar Department of English, University of Sialkot, and also Visiting Lecturer in Bahauddin Zakariya University & Emerson University Bosan Road Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email ID: aqeelpk786@yahoo.com raoageel581@gmail.com

Email ID: 1230102073@uskt.edu.pk

Abstract

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, represents a pivotal regional platform aimed at fostering cooperation and development among its member states. Despite its potential, SAARC has faced persistent political challenges that hinder its progress and regional integration. This study explores the complexities surrounding SAARC, examining socio-political barriers such as inter-state conflicts, trust deficits, and governance issues, while highlighting the opportunities it offers for fostering economic collaboration, cultural exchange, and collective growth. Employing a qualitative methodology, this research relies on an extensive literature review, drawing from academic journals, policy reports, and historical analyses to identify patterns and propose actionable solutions. The study reviews the interplay between regional geopolitics and institutional inefficiencies that constrain SAARC's functionality. This approach also facilitates the identification of actionable strategies to address challenges, such as fostering trust-building mechanisms, reforming institutional structures, and encouraging equitable participation among member states. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on regionalism in South Asia by providing nuanced insights into SAARC's potential as a transformative regional entity. It advocates for a reinvigorated approach to regional cooperation that prioritizes inclusivity, resilience, and adaptability, thereby positioning SAARC as a cornerstone of sustainable development in South Asia.

Keywords: SAARC, South Asia, Pakistan, Economy, Political, Geopolitics, Challenges, Opportunities etc.



Background

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional intergovernmental organization founded in 1985 with the aim of promoting economic and social development, cultural exchange, and regional integration among its member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. With around one fourth of world population SAARC has enormous potential to forge integration in such a part of the world comprising of similar culture and comparable developmental issues. Chakma (2018)

Its activities cover a broad area that touches on economic, social, political, and environmental aspects like trade, poverty eradication, education, health, energy, environment and wildlife among others. Ironically, over the last few years, SAARC has not made much headway due to enduring interstate disputes particularly between India and Pakistan, and absence of efficient institutional means of conflict management. Besides, the variation in economic power and political strength of Member states has led to the emergence of power relations hindering collective decision making. Still, programmes including SAFTA indicate that SAARC should improve regional integration. Through solving structural problems, introducing trust and equality, and correspondent development, SAARC can provide powerful foundation for South Asian sustainable development and stability. Teneja et al, (20211)

There are a number of factors which make SAARC capable of playing a very influential role towards the integration of the region. Some of such regional groupings are the South Asian Free Trade Area that describes the manner in which trade obstacles between member countries will be reduced and their interdependence strengthened. There are possibilities of mutual progress among those sectors which entail cooperation, such as energy, climatic change, and disaster relief.

Programs like the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) plan to invest in social, economic and infrastructure sectors and foster topical projects for the improvement of growth in association with the sustainable development goals. Therefore, through people-oriented reforms, like developing better healthcare, education, SAARC is likely to better regional cooperation and improve wellbeing in South Asia. Bishwakarma & Hu, (2022)

International organization like the United Nations, the World Bank and the Asian development bank can offer funds for regional projects as well as techniques. Osunalto, observer states often play crucial roles in facilitating strategic partnership that could help SAARC to confront transnational issues more so; observer states such as China, United States, and the European Union should extend their memberships to active members within the SAARC region in order to strengthen the regional group. In such a way, SAARC can develop a balanced vision of regional cooperation meeting with priorities of regional members and with goals and objectives of global initiatives. Huq et al, (2024)

In order to contribute to such an outcome, it is necessary for SAARC to uphold meaningful reform which would resolve the structural and functional problems. These may involve changing the decision making model to embrace a concept of democracy where membership states are fairly represented, defining and agreeing on ways to solve conflicts among the membership states, and developing an effective compliance procedure for enforcing the agreed decisions. Perhaps through people to people diplomacy people cultural swaps and exchanges together with



academic links success can be achieved in healing political enmities in the region. Dar & Nain (2023)

Furthermore, the member states need to ensure a non-pol preferably, member states must promise to keep SAARC's agenda devoid of politics and stick to issues and concerns of the regional and sub regional importance such as poverty reduction, climate change and public health. Foreign policy of the SAARC countries is in need of a new vision and renewed political will, and then SAARC can turn into a vibrant Organization developed to counter the socio-political challenges in South Asia other than also utilizing the opportunities available for development in every South Asian Country. Kousar (2024)

The foundation of the organization was laid in the year 1985 with the main first SAARC Summit held in Dhaka. Originally, heads of seven member states of the region signed the SAARC Charter that aims at cooperation in economic development on one hand and cultural and social development on the other hand; however, Afghanistan did not join until 2007. It also includes decisions looking towards reducing poverty and strengthening the Economy through integration and cooperation at regional level. This summit set up SAARC's institutional structure and its priorities which to an extent are based on the member's cooperation in such sectors as agriculture, rural development and telecommunication. Ahmad (2017)

The Islamabad Summit was on regional security and on economic interaction between the members of the organization. Presidents assaulted terrorism and approved SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. Further, they talked on deepening trade relations and embarked on measures to increase cultural and academic relations. One of the notable events of this year was the focus was on addressing transnational issues, which called for international cooperation. Shukla (2024)

Colombo SAARC Summit also focused upon the theme of economic co-operation and reduction of poverty elsewhere. Presidents signed the SAARC Social Charter on human development and social justice and introduced the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme for certain categories of people to enter other countries. The previous meeting emphasized on trade issues and framed the strategy map for forming the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) which has been implemented in 2006. Anwar (2022)

The twelfth summit was a major significant for the economic cooperation in SAARC because member states endorsed the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) which sought to checklist trade liberalization. This summit also approved the Islamabad Declaration which dealt mainly with poverty, infrastructure development and counter terrorism. It was not a secret that presidents underlined the importance of enhancing regional cooperation in tackling the challenges that shocked the world, such as climate change and energy issues. Ashraf (2004)

The last SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu stressed improved interaction among its members where subjects discussed included upgrade of road, rail and air links across the member countries under the theme "Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity". But, the summit did not came up with major trends and more over because of political enmity specially between India and Pakistan. Whereas the heads of state agreed on partnership deals in energy, the summit revealed that SAARC remains plagued by the ability to reach consensus as well as subsequent implementation of decided tasks. Bhattarai (2021)



Besides holding summits, SAARC conducts ministerial and technical sessions to prop up its work plan. These are the Council of Ministers: foreign ministers, Standing Committee: senior bureaucratic counterparts and technical committees by sectors such as health, agriculture and disaster committees. Much as these meeting formations have enabled such cooperation in health and education sectors, the processes are often retarded by political barriers and shortage of funds. Although SAARC has been convening numerous meetings and issuing declarations and agreements they are implemented in a passive way. Muscle power and especially when mighty nations are involved like India and Pakistan for instance the potentiality of the organization is usually marred. However, to positively influence the social welfare of the region, SAARC needs to overcome these problems and focus on operational decisions beneficial to the whole region. Raza et al, (2024)

Research Significance

This research is important as it offers an interpretation of socio-political issues that hamper the organization's performance and also maps out provisional cooperation opportunities of the SAARC in South Asia. Through a detailed analysis of inter-state relations in the region and the operation of institutions in the region, this work forms part of the growing literature in regionalism and theoretical framework in international relations, in one of the world's largest and most culturally diverse regions. It is hoped that the findings will be useful for policy makers, academics and stake holders to understand how SAARC needs to be strengthened in achieving a common agenda of dealing with poverty alleviation, climate change, security threats, wealth creation for the people of South Asia and peace in the region thereby ensuring sustainable development for the larger good of humanity.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary socio-political challenges hindering SAARC's effectiveness in promoting regional cooperation in South Asia?
2. How do inter-state conflicts and power asymmetries among SAARC member states influence its decision-making and operational efficiency?
3. What strategies and reforms can be implemented to overcome SAARC's challenges and leverage its opportunities for sustainable regional development?

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the socio-political challenges that undermine SAARC's role as a regional organization in South Asia.
2. To examine the impact of inter-state tensions, particularly between major players like India and Pakistan, on the functionality and progress of SAARC initiatives.
3. To propose actionable recommendations for enhancing SAARC's institutional capacity and fostering greater socio-political and economic cooperation among member states.

Literature Review

Erum (2025) study underscores the pivotal role of political economy in shaping the cultural and institutional dimensions of Pakistan, highlighting how shifts in political ideologies and socio-economic structures have transformed the country's political landscape over time. Employing a qualitative approach that examines political transitions, economic reforms, and cultural change at the global, regional, and national levels, the research investigates the interplay between political processes, economic decisions, and cultural identity. Although there are positive impacts of cross



culture learning and exposure at the same time it may also challenge the traditional practices and financial and political system of a country. This situation may prevail around the globe at wider level.

Singh (2017) emphasizes its role as a regional cooperation platform intended to foster integration among South Asian states despite historical grievances and political differences. Rooted in a shared cultural and civilizational past but fragmented after 1947, the region faces challenges of uneven economic growth, ideological diversity in governance, and persistent trust deficits. The paper considers the history of SAARC along with world events such as the new regional blocs that arose after the Cold War and the post-Cold War liberal order. One of the more important conclusions of this paper is that the member countries balance the economic aspects of agreements such as SAFTA with the unresolved political and security issues, as well as the abiding political mistrust that SAARC faces, proving that SAARC is in dire need of new policies that disregard history and focus on the future possibilities of collaboration.

Shahbaz & Muzaffar (2025) discusses that SAARC's primary objective and the single most important achievement is to act as a stabilizing regional forum is reflected best on the focus of this with concentration of regional and internationally based disorder, flowing confusions, SAARC interim clashes of the period. With this diplomatic block, SAARC is able to utilize the crisis inspired qualitative studies, based on a variety of SAARC documents, books, studies, and on the elite's voice as well, to nurture and manage said conflict and promote prosperity. Member countries, more in control of their politics and maintaining peace with neighbors, have been able to perform a relatively more unequal distribution of wealth.

Bhattarai (2025) study critically examines the achievements and limitations of SAARC within the broader socio-political and economic framework of South Asia, where regional integration remains a persistent challenge. Using a qualitative approach that combines case studies, expert interviews, and document analysis, the research provides an in-depth account of SAARC's performance since its establishment in 1985. Study findings reveals that there are challenges for SAARC, including weaknesses in its structure, financial and political competition among countries and rival like Pakistan and India who may not agree on common interest due to a toxic history. There is need to have a strong commitment for regional level development beyond country's policies. If there will be no common agenda and plan there may not be common success of SAARC and regional level blocs including ASEAN or the EU.

Shah (2025) literature focuses on the fact that Pakistan's security environment is inextricably linked to political instability, which is detrimental to governance and the state as a whole in both tackling interior and exterior threats with effectiveness. This research is based on historical proceeding and analysis of prevailing data by consulting the factors of terrorism, and socio economic issues. There is also understanding of border critical conditions and disputes. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was able to find out gaps in governance due to these barriers and challenges.

Khan et al, (2025) literature highlights that the period between 2022 and 2025 was marked by intense power political confrontation across South Asia, with the Kabul-Kashmir corridor emerging as a central theatre of inter-state rivalry and persistent instability. This research explores role of major powers in the region including United States, India, Iran, China and Pakistan that may be a great power around globe when work in alliance. Findings suggest that



great power interference has exacerbated regional divisions, fueling insurgency spillovers, reinforcing militant networks, and deepening proxy warfare.

Özbilgin et al, (2024), describes the influence of political diversity and inclusion in Asia. Political diversity is one of the main challenges faced by SAARC to implement its agenda. It shows a complex relation between cultural norms, political affiliations, and country's external relations. Countries find out political connections most critical as the sustainability of these connections.

Akcigit et al, (2023) shares that most critical problem affecting SAARC to date, is the continuing political hostility between India and Pakistan. Their past disputes astonishingly notably the KASHMIR issue adds a trust deficit and hinders the SAARC cooperation that may normally revolve around their set agenda. Disputes are frequently carried over to the multilateral arena; politics is introduced and many objectives are systematically sabotaged.

Yousaf et al, (2017), reveals that India and Pakistan historically have had a hostile relationship that delays the SAARC summits; the 19th SAARC Summit was cancelled in Islamabad in 2016. This rivalry impedes the organization's capacity to address other more fundamental regional concerns as well as compromising the member states' cohesion.

Obino, (2009), SAARC member countries have vast difference in terms of economic and development status of the country with one of the largest economy like India and other small economy nations like Bhutan and Sri Lanka. These disparities lead to serious distortions of power between large states that set the pace of the organization and small states that hardly get an opportunity to express themselves.

Desai, (2010), it deepens regional contradictions and weakens the perception of reciprocity and mutual gain, which is so important for effective regional cooperation. Further, there is weak economic cooperation and integration among member countries hence little room for economic synergy in the region.

Sarker et al, (2019), in study on Regional economic regimes and the environment discusses that one feature that stands out extremely clearly is that the institution of SAARC does not have the structures that are required to compel compliance with decisions once and for all. SAARC is significantly weaker in terms of the central authority or treaty-based agreements compared with other regional organizations including the EU and as result, its resolutions and declarations remain more of visionary statements.

Bishwakarma & Hu, (2022), explains the Problems and challenges for SAARC and stat that a great challenge is to largely render without adequate ability to handle inter-state disputes, therefore leaving political relations strained. Such an institutional weakness is a cause of concern for SAARC as a region and seriously diminishes its prospects as a regional organization.

Chaturvedi et al, (2015), reveals that there is inadequate regional trade and therefore low integration. The SAARC has tried to improve the volume of the trade among its members, for instance through the SAFTA, but still intra SAARC trade is limited and its contribution to the total trade of the region is less than 5 % . Inadequate transport infrastructure, bureaucracy and tariffs and non-tariff barriers negatively affect export and import of goods and services between member countries.

According to Banik, & Gilbert (2010), India and Pakistan rivalries continued to slow down the effective realization of trade liberalization agreements, which has been the other drawback to



regional growth. Significant improvements in economic integration being otherwise missing, SAARC has limited capacity to advance the interests of regional affluence.

Gippner, (2010) in research on Energy cooperation in South Asia reveals that external players, including China, United States, and Russia, have added another layer of depth to functional incapability of SAARC. The members of the organizations tend to support big global players depending on their particular self-interested tendencies that lead to fragmentation of the organization. For example India remained rather passive in SAARC initiatives because of its concerns with China's increasing clout in South Asia. Dash, (1996) these extra-regional players also shift focus away from regional integration and complicate existing tensions making it almost impossible for SAARC to remain on one course.

Rehman & Rashid (2017), these are generally physical and political environment challenges, social and cultural challenges for SAARC in region. The countries of South Asia have similar problems including climate change, natural disasters, poverty, and health threats yet SAARC has failed to deal with problems competently.

Azam & Khan (2016), in-efficiency and weaker management, insufficient resource mobilization as well as inadequately coordinated finances and funding restrain regional initiatives in things like disaster or public health. For instance, although SAARC has outlined structures such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, its efforts have largely been weak, calls for politics.

Singh, (2016) states there is lack of multi sectoral political commitment and the wavering commitment are some of the main factors. An endemic problem in the SAARC context is the lack of credibility of the member states towards the objectives of the organization. National interests dictate the majority of the decisions hence defeating the objectives of the regional integration as conceived by SAARC. Kumar, (2020), political leaders of SAARC countries may pay lip service to joint initiatives, it is believed that many of these diplomatic actions are tokenistic and the SAARC platform is not conducive to positive diplomatic action and follow-through to agreements of relief to the affected nations that are the subject of this dissertation.

Ganie & Ahmad, (2015), discusses the Solution of Problems In South Asia and state that the organization has the capacity of promoting cooperation and development in the regions, for overcoming these impediments, serious changes should be made, and political will should be strengthened and commitment to the principles of creation of the organization should be given again. If so addressed, SAARC has the potential to turn into a successful forum for exercising diplomacy, development of harmonious and peaceful relations in the South Asian region.

Rodríguez-Delgado (2007), discusses The South Asian Free Trade Area commonly referred as SAFTA, which was signed in 2004, became effective in 2006 and its ultimate goal is to increase liberalization of traded goods in the participating countries of SAARC. It requires tariff liberalization and huge deference is paid to LDCs with transitional periods and longer time horizons. However, these markets remained a minor success for various reasons among them political interferences, non-tariff barriers to trade and low intra-regional trade.

Singh, (2017), reveals that SAFTA seeks to provide for cooperation among the member states of SAARC in the field of environment. This convention addresses the environmental issues specifically in the South Asian region in line with combined strategies. It fosters a culture of sustainable development, protection of the biological diversity and reduction of impacts of



environment degradation. Lisbon treaty also notes the willingness of member states to share knowledge and resource in the management of environmental risks and climate change.

Kathmandu, (2011), discusses that South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation – Agreement on Trade in Services (SAARC SATIS) was signed in 2010 is expected to reduce barriers to services trade within the member nations of the SAARC while the SAFTA which focuses on goods trade. It includes major service industries, such as finance, travel and tourism, and education and aims to build the foundation for strengthening cooperation and economic development of the services industries through increasing the volume of service trade.

Vaidyanath & Bhardwaj (2023), reveals in research on SAARC regional disaster law that there is need for progressive development on SAARC Agreement on Quick Reaction to Natural Calamity. Member countries may respond quickly and provide resources, experience base and supply humanitarian assistance as per the problem of the member state during emergencies. It focuses on the signs of natural catastrophes, readiness against such disasters and cooperation to reduce the number of lives and assets that are lost in the zone.

Naazer&Hussan (2016), in an assessment of three decades of SAARC shares that Agreement related to the setting up of Regional Standards may help the state to collectively standardize the regional standard form to ensure the qualities and safety of products packed and traded in the member states. Its objectives are to abolish technical regulations and standards that affect trade between members, encourage and improve cooperation on certification and accreditation of goods and services originating from member states.

VENUGOPAL et al (2015) discusses SAARC Agreement on Multilateral Legal System on Conformity Assessment, this agreement also gives the ground on which the member countries will give recognition to the conformity assessment procedures. This also assist in the reduction of multiple testing and certification through the simplification of trade hence guaranteeing quality and credibility of the products in the regions.

Choudhry & Jabeen (2013), the nine-member SAARC organization as a donor of this treaty supports ratification of Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. This protocol was built on the 1987 SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism by adding threats that are recent such as cyber terrorism and terrorism financing. It strengthens cooperation of member states by sharing information, building capacity and mutual legal assistance in the fight against terrorism.

Rahman et al, (2017) in research on SAARC shared that there is an agreement entered into between the Governments of the Member States of SAARC for the Establishment of SAARC Food Bank The member countries of SAARC agreed upon the establishment of SAARC Food Bank in 2007 in order to provide food during extraordinary situations. Every member state deposits food grains with the bank which can be invoked in the form of food crisis, natural disasters, fluctuations in the food price and so on so forth; thus, promoting regional integration.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the political challenges and opportunities associated with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex political dynamics, historical contexts, and inter-state relations within South Asia. Data will be collected through secondary sources, including scholarly articles, policy papers, official



SAARC documents, regional studies, and reports from international organizations. The research adopts an interpretive and analytical design, focusing on themes such as political cooperation, regional integration, leadership roles, and policy conflicts among member states. By applying content analysis, the study aims to interpret how political factors have influenced SAARC's functioning and regional cohesion. This approach enables the researchers to capture nuanced insights into the underlying political motivations, institutional limitations, and prospects for regional collaboration in South Asia.

Discussion

Improvement in global level environment provides opportunities to SAARC and active role in enhanced collaboration at regional level. There is need of regional cooperation for political and economic challenges in South Asia as whole region is facing issues of extreme poverty, inadequate energy sources and impacts of climate change. These political barriers may be reduced by communication and coordination, and making people aware regarding problems. There is potential of regional peace development through SAARC and promotion of dialogue to solve and highlight issues of common interests.

The political landscape of South Asia presents both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for regional cooperation under the framework of SAARC. Despite its founding vision of promoting peace, stability, and collective progress, SAARC has often been hindered by political rivalries most notably the strained relations between India and Pakistan. These tensions have limited the organization's ability to implement effective policies and foster trust among member states. There are many issue like conflicts on borders, regional level issues, and lack of political strength causing decrease in influence of SAARC.

Conclusion

Progress of SAARC may contribute to the progress of South Asian countries as there will be cooperation and coordination across political boundaries. This will also enhance confidence level of member countries to believe in resources and skills. SAARC also guides towards right direction in achieving common issues and problems.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) embodies both the promise and the paradox of regionalism in South Asia. While it was established with the vision of fostering economic growth, social progress, and cultural cooperation, its effectiveness has often been stymied by entrenched political challenges. Rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan, have frequently overshadowed the organization's potential, limiting its ability to act as a unified body addressing regional issues.

However there are many challenges to SAARC in implementation of decisions and plans. There is also progress in kind of landmarks including SAFTA, SAARC Food Bank, framework on cooperation in environment and disaster management. This progress also shows that there is scope to achieve common objectives and set goals at regional level to achieve common gains.

Recommendation

Integration may be increased with involvement of youth in regional level matters. Students and youth exchange learning programs may be a good opportunity to increase collaboration for solution of common issues at regional level. SAFTA is a good opportunity to increase people-to-people contact, and give strength to cooperation for addressing issues of public health, impacts of climate change and energy production. SAARC may be a source to bring transformational



change and sustainable growth. There may be reduction in political and economic disputes and step towards collective prosperity across South Asia.

To strengthen SAARC's role as a regional cooperation platform, member states should prioritize building mutual trust through confidence-building measures and structured dialogue mechanisms. Addressing inter-state conflicts and reducing political distrust is essential for unlocking the organization's potential. Reforming institutional frameworks to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability would also allow SAARC to move beyond symbolic declarations toward meaningful policy implementation. Encouraging equitable participation of all members, regardless of size or influence, can help create a more inclusive environment where smaller states feel empowered in decision-making.

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