

## **“Reinterpreting SAARC: Resurrection of South Asian Zombie”**

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### **Abstract**

South Asian regional cooperation was first proposed by Bangladeshi President Ziaur Rahman in 1977. Foreign secretaries from the seven South Asian countries discussed this idea in detail during a few sessions. It led to a summit of South Asian foreign ministers on August 1-2, 1983 in New Delhi. Ultimately, seven South Asian countries—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka—founded the "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation" (SAARC) on December 8, 1985. The decision was made to establish Kathmandu as the permanent headquarters of the SAARC in 1987. Afghanistan became the eighth member when it was joined in November 2005. Until the next meeting of the group, the host country assumes the role of SAARC Chair. The host country holds the Chair of SAARC until the convening of the next summit. According to article 10 of SAARC charter, all decisions are taken on the principle of unanimity and political and bilateral issues are excluded from deliberations (Ashraf, Nasrudin, & Akhir, 2017).

Pakistan and India were both concerned about joining SAARC. Pakistan thought India would top the group handily because of its size and advantageous position. In the center of the Asian continent is India. India was the only other country in South Asia to border another country before Afghanistan joined the region. India is the only country that borders all seven SAARC countries. Pakistan thought that SAARC did not further its interests in this way. Nonetheless, India interpreted it as an attempt by its neighbors to band together against India. Moreover, India thought that the idea of bilateralism might lose significance in favor of regional collaboration. Nevertheless, despite their reservations, both countries joined SAARC. (Sharma, 2014).

SAARC was primarily modelled on David Mitrany's "functional" approach. European Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations are two famous and successful examples of functional approach of regional integration. This approach postulates that peace would prevail through working together in market space. According to this logic, technical and economic cooperation will lead to political harmony (Kumar, 2018).

### **A case of degraded regionalism: SAARC as a Zombie**

The literature on international relations distinguishes between three categories of regional and global organisations: "alive," "dead," and "zombie" (Kumar, 2018). Live organisations, such as the EU and ASEAN, operate efficiently and accomplish their original goals.

Organisations classified as "dead" are those that have ceased operations, such as those from the Cold War.

While they still exist, zombie organisations never seem to get closer to their goals. One well-known example of a "zombie" organisation is SAARC.

Frailty of SAARC is evident from the fact that it has held only 18 summits in last 34 years of its existence, notwithstanding the fact that the Article 3 of SAARC Charter requires the

heads of state or government to meet once a year. In fact the number of summits per decade have constantly decreased i.e. eight summits were held in first decade, six in second decade and only 4 in third decade (Ahmad, 2017).

### **Mother of major structural problems: SAARC Charter (1985): -**

The 1985 SAARC charter is the primary source of the organization's collapse. Some of the structural limitations that today dangle like an albatross around its neck were spawned by the charter.

Article 10 of the 1985 SAARC Charter states, first and foremost, that "decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity" Although the purpose of this paragraph was to safeguard the views of the smaller South Asian countries, it ultimately resulted in a structure that made it impossible for any disagreement or dissent to be addressed institutionally. Effective regional organizations like the EU and ASEAN use qualified majority and consensus processes to reach an agreement. In the EU, a decision needs the support of just 16 of the 28 member states in order to be implemented. In a similar vein, ASEAN prioritises reaching consensus without requiring unanimity. The "ASEAN minus X" policy, implemented by ASEAN, allows a nation to choose not to participate in an agreement or decision (Kumar, 2018).

Second, according to Article 10 of the 1985 SAARC charter, "bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations" There are several cross-border wars in South Asia. This region has had five full-scale interstate confrontations in the latter part of the 20th century. By excluding the prospect of resolving regional issues, this rule severely cripples the organisation (Kumar, 2018).

Thirdly, it was a historic error to keep the institution from becoming into a political arena for settling bilateral and regional disputes. At any of the eighteen summits, there has been no agreement on political endowments to turn SAARC into an openly political organization. The noncreative color assigned to the SAARC Secretariat is a statement that they are unwilling to give it a political hue. This unwillingness to imbue it with a political essence is demonstrated by the SAARC Secretariat's noncreative mandate of merely supervising and arranging.(Obino, 2009).

### **Power Asymmetry in South Asia: - An extra bottleneck**

SAARC has never had the same level of impact as India. More than two-thirds of the region's land area, more than three-quarters of its population, more than 77.8% of its GDP, and a sizeable share of its armed forces are comprised of India (Kumar, 2018). The geographical center of South Asia is where India is situated. The other little South Asian republics are strongly intimidated, mistrustful, and suspicious of Pakistan because of its economic and military supremacy. India's size and strength often lead to perceptions of it as a bully in the area or as a big brother. This imbalance of power allows other countries, like the US and China, to interfere in regional politics.

### **The Regional Security Complex Theory and the Indo-Pak rivalry**

It is the main reason why SAARC doesn't work well. There have always been conflicts along the Radcliffe Line. It has shown to be a significant obstacle to regional integration. SAARC

is practically dysfunctional due to Indo-Pak antagonism, which can be explained by two key recent episodes. When India, along with Bangladesh, Afghanistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, boycotted the 19th SAARC summit, which was set to take place in Islamabad, Pakistan, from November 15–19, 2016, it was another blow to the organisation (Safi & Boone, 2016). When Modi chose to call BIMSTEC leaders to his second swearing-in ceremony in June of this year instead of SAARC leaders, it was placed on life support (Chaudhury, 2019).

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever aptly explains SAARC's ineffectiveness caused by Indo-Pak rivalry. According to this theory, security concern of neighbouring countries is always felt strongly and it can only be dealt with mutually. Thus regional cooperation depends, to a great extent, on bilateral conflicts (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

### **Why is the zombie unkillable? -**

Compared to ASEAN and the EU, SAARC covers a larger area. Its population is much more than that of the EU and ASEAN, making up about 22.5% of the world's total. Despite this, it remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. It was predicated on the "functional" theory of regionalism, which, as was previously said, maintains that economic integration will result in peace and stability in the area. Despite the functionalist focus, there hasn't been much progress on the trade and economic fronts. Though 60% of intraregional trade in Europe has been promoted by the EU, intra-SAARC trade makes up only 5% of all trade in South Asia.

Since other countries, including India, have frequently used SAARC as a negotiation chip to advance their national security stances, it cannot be abandoned. For example, in order to host the fifth SAARC summit, Sri Lanka demanded in 1989 that the IPKF leave (Obino, 2009). In an effort to exert pressure on Pakistan to combat terrorism emanating from its borders, India recently opted not to attend the 19th SAARC summit, which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan.

We now have a venue for unofficial diplomacy on the fringes of yearly meetings thanks to SAARC. It has provided India with a chance to discuss bilateral relations informally during these summits. For instance, during the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad, India and Pakistan issued a joint statement that restarted the dialogue on Kashmir (Obino, 2009). We so desperately need such a single platform, since it unifies all of the South Asian republics on a regional level.

Regional problems require regional solutions. Thus, killing the zombie is not an option. Rather, we ought to think about methods to revive it.

### **SAARC 2.0: A Zombie Comeback**

Therefore, it should be clear from the preceding paragraphs that reviving SAARC is in our country's best interests. The only regional group that officially represents South Asia is SAARC. This document outlines different strategies and tactics to bring back SAARC, which has turned into a zombie. Given how drastically South Asia's geopolitical landscape has changed during the past three decades, it is no longer representative of those realities.

**Reimagining SAARC theoretically: -**

The theoretical coherence of SAARC has weakened in the twenty-first century. Its original foundation was the regional integration hypothesis put out by functionalists. It hasn't been able to match the successes of the EU and ASEAN in terms of economic integration; these two regions are great examples of functionalist regional groupings. The functionalist perspective holds that political boundaries will become arbitrary and economic cooperation will penetrate the political and security domains (Obino, 2009). But in the 34 years since SAARC was founded, this pattern has not been noted in South Asia. It is believed that a theoretical reinterpretation is therefore required. A novel theoretical foundation for regional integration should be used to rethink SAARC. For example, "communication theory" discusses developing strong interpersonal relationships within a community. Its main goal is to fortify international relationships between civil society organisations. Comparably, the "instrumental approach" calls on states to put aside intra-regional disagreements and unite against an outside, hostile force—in this case, China (Kumar, 2018). Before it's too late, it is imperative that this change is made.

**Redesigning SAARC: -**

The structural architecture of SAARC has to be significantly changed. SAARC was intentionally founded to be a politically neutral organization, as this article has demonstrated. It has been demonstrated to have had a key role in the regional organization's demise. Consequently, article 10, which forbids discussing bilateral and controversial issues, need to be removed from the charter. A window of opportunity for the settlement of protracted interstate conflicts and issues would be created. It will boost the organization's standing in politics. Moreover, specialists in regional integration argue that political considerations are more important than economic ones when it comes to regional integration (Sharma, 2014). This alteration to its design has the potential to revive the zombie.

**Reorientation of the Organisation:**

In the end, SAARC needs an organizational orientation. It was made in opposition to the local Indian population's hegemony. But the globe has become bipolar due to events like the nuclearization of South Asia and the end of the Cold War, which makes it difficult for India to impose its will on its smaller neighbors. Within this framework, particular focus ought to be placed on China's nonviolent rise to prominence as a potential regional hegemon and a major force in both the military and economy. India needs to balance out Chinese dominance in South Asia and the Indian Ocean by joining the SAARC regional organization. India's South Asian neighbors need to actively back some of its foreign policy objectives. India must therefore re-evaluate SAARC as a possible counterbalance to China's assertive actions and aspirations to become the continent's dominant power.

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