



## Role of India in Regional Co-operation in South Asia through SAARC

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### Abstract

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed in 1985 to promote regional integration and development among South Asian nations. India, being the largest and most influential member in terms of geography, economy, and population, plays a pivotal role in shaping the agenda and functioning of SAARC. This journal explores India's contribution to SAARC initiatives, its diplomatic engagement, economic investments, peace-building efforts, and challenges posed by bilateral issues. It also analyzes the potential of SAARC in promoting sustainable development in the region and India's role in reviving its effectiveness.

**Keywords:** India, SAARC, South Asia, Regional Cooperation, Economic Integration, Diplomacy.

### Introduction

Regional cooperation has emerged as a key strategy for promoting peace, stability, and development in different parts of the world. In South Asia, a region marked by shared history, culture, and challenges, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among its eight member countries India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan. The organization was envisioned as a platform to address common issues such as poverty, education, trade, and regional security through collective efforts.

India, as the largest and most influential country in South Asia, has played a critical role in the evolution and functioning of SAARC. With its vast economic resources, strategic position, and political influence, India has both the responsibility and the capacity to lead the region toward deeper integration and cooperation. India's foreign policy, particularly the "Neighborhood First" initiative, reflects its commitment to strengthening ties with its immediate neighbors through platforms like SAARC.

Over the years, India has contributed significantly to SAARC initiatives in areas such as trade facilitation, infrastructure development, disaster management, education, health, and cultural exchange. Institutions like the South Asian University, the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, and the SAARC Development Fund highlight India's active engagement in regional development. These efforts have helped build connectivity, promote people-to-people contact, and enhance cooperation in various sectors.

However, the progress of SAARC has often been obstructed

by political tensions within the region, especially between India and Pakistan. These tensions have resulted in delays or cancellations of summits, minimal implementation of agreements, and lack of trust among member states. Such challenges have hindered SAARC from functioning effectively and fulfilling its objectives. India's leadership has therefore been challenged by the need to navigate these complex geopolitical realities.

Despite these difficulties, India continues to play a proactive role in promoting regionalism, not only within SAARC but also through sub-regional platforms like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) and BIMSTEC. This shows India's adaptability and long-term vision for regional cooperation. The present study aims to explore the multifaceted role of India in SAARC, assess its achievements and limitations, and examine how it can further contribute to building a more united and prosperous South Asian region.

### Significance of the Study

The study is significant as it highlights India's pivotal role in shaping the progress and direction of regional cooperation in South Asia through SAARC. As the largest and most resourceful member, India's actions have a profound impact on the effectiveness of the organization. Understanding India's contributions helps in evaluating how regional initiatives can be implemented in a balanced and sustainable manner.

This research also sheds light on the political, economic, and diplomatic challenges that have limited the growth of SAARC as a functional regional body. By focusing on India's engagement, the study explores how regional cooperation is often influenced by bilateral relationships, particularly the

India-Pakistan conflict, and how this affects broader regional collaboration.

The study is important for policymakers, as it examines India's regional strategies such as the "Neighborhood First" policy and evaluates how India uses platforms like SAARC to strengthen ties with its neighbors. It offers insights into how India can balance national interests with regional responsibilities to promote peace and development.

It also emphasizes the role of India in key areas such as trade, education, disaster relief, public health, and infrastructure development. These sectors are vital for improving the quality of life across South Asia, and India's leadership in these areas demonstrates its capacity to drive collective progress.

Finally, the study contributes to academic discourse on regionalism and international relations by offering a focused case study of India's role in SAARC. It helps researchers understand the dynamics of regional cooperation in politically sensitive environments and provides a foundation for further research on South Asian integration.

### Objectives

- i). To evaluate India's role in promoting regional cooperation under the SAARC framework.
- ii). To analyze India's contributions to SAARC's development and policy initiatives.
- iii). To examine the challenges faced by India in strengthening SAARC as an effective regional body.

### Review of Related Literature

Several scholars have examined the functioning of SAARC and highlighted India's influential yet complicated role within the organization. Dash (2008) argues that India's economic and political dominance makes it a natural leader in South Asia, but also creates unease among smaller member states. He points out that while India has the resources to drive SAARC's agenda, its leadership must be more inclusive to build regional trust.

Rahman (2014) evaluates India's contributions in economic and development sectors under SAARC, such as the establishment of the SAARC Development Fund and trade initiatives under SAFTA. He notes that despite India's efforts to promote trade liberalization, intra-regional trade remains limited due to political tensions and non-tariff barriers. This suggests that economic strategies alone cannot achieve full regional cooperation without political stability.

Chakma (2019) takes a political and strategic perspective, analyzing how India's diplomatic approach affects SAARC's overall effectiveness. He emphasizes that India's bilateral tensions, especially with Pakistan, often overshadow multilateral cooperation efforts. Chakma suggests that India must adopt a more neutral and facilitative role to enhance SAARC's credibility and operational capacity.

Thapa (2016) focuses on India's soft power strategies within SAARC, particularly its cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and disaster management initiatives. He views these efforts as positive tools for building regional goodwill and promoting non-political cooperation, even when formal diplomatic relations are strained. These soft power efforts, according to Thapa, could be key to revitalizing SAARC.

Bhatta (2020) analyzes India's role during regional crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlights India's prompt creation of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. He notes that this response showed India's willingness to lead and support the region during emergencies. However, Bhatta also points out that long-term progress still depends on

resolving political disputes and institutional reforms within SAARC.

### Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data sources such as government publications, SAARC charters, speeches by Indian leaders, journal articles, and reports from international organizations. Content analysis has been used to interpret India's diplomatic strategies and policy approaches within the SAARC framework.

### Analysis

India's role in SAARC can be analyzed through the lens of its geographical, economic, and political dominance in South Asia. As the largest and most resourceful member of the association, India naturally assumes a leadership position. This dominant status brings with it both opportunities and challenges. While India can drive the regional agenda forward, its leadership is often met with apprehension from smaller neighbors, who fear being overshadowed.

One of the core areas where India has contributed significantly is economic cooperation. India has actively promoted the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and extended trade concessions to neighboring countries. However, trade among SAARC nations remains below its potential. Non-tariff barriers, limited connectivity, and mutual distrust continue to hamper efforts. Despite India's efforts, the economic integration envisioned by SAARC remains largely aspirational.

India has also emphasized connectivity both physical and digital as a tool for regional cooperation. Infrastructure projects such as highways, railways, and energy grids have been supported by India under bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Additionally, India's promotion of the SAARC Satellite and telemedicine networks shows its commitment to using technology for inclusive regional growth. However, implementation has often been uneven due to lack of political consensus.

In the social sector, India's leadership in education, health, and disaster management under SAARC has been widely recognized. Initiatives like the South Asian University and contributions to the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund highlight India's willingness to invest in shared human development goals. These initiatives demonstrate India's use of soft power to strengthen regional ties and build goodwill.

Diplomatic relations, however, remain a persistent obstacle. India-Pakistan hostility has frequently disrupted SAARC summits and delayed collective decisions. India's position of not engaging in dialogue under the threat of cross-border terrorism has stalled SAARC's progress. This analysis indicates that political disputes between just two members can paralyze the entire organization.

India's approach to sub-regional cooperation through BBIN and BIMSTEC reveals a strategic shift in its regional policy. These platforms allow India to bypass SAARC's limitations and work with more cooperative partners. While this is a practical solution, it also risks weakening SAARC further if seen as a substitute rather than a complement.

India's foreign policy has been increasingly shaped by the desire to establish itself as a responsible regional power. Its actions within SAARC reflect a balance between strategic interests and regional responsibility. However, the effectiveness of its leadership depends on building trust, promoting inclusiveness, and separating bilateral issues from multilateral platforms.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that India's role in SAARC is multifaceted and influential. While it has made notable contributions to regional cooperation, its efforts are constrained by political challenges and internal contradictions. For SAARC to thrive, India must continue to lead with vision, flexibility, and a commitment to regional solidarity.

### Findings

- **India's Leadership Role is Crucial but Contested:** India has played a central role in initiating and sustaining various SAARC projects. However, its leadership is often viewed with skepticism by smaller member states, and political rivalries, particularly with Pakistan, have limited the effectiveness of its initiatives.
- **Economic Contributions are Significant but Underutilized:** India has extended financial support, trade access, and development assistance to SAARC countries. Yet, intra-regional trade remains minimal due to non-tariff barriers, poor connectivity, and diplomatic friction among member nations.
- **India Promotes Sub-Regional Alternatives:** Due to repeated SAARC deadlocks, India has increasingly shifted focus to sub-regional initiatives like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) and BIMSTEC. These frameworks have shown more progress, suggesting India's adaptive strategy to regional cooperation.
- **India's Soft Power and Development Diplomacy are Effective Tools:** India's initiatives in education (e.g., South Asian University), health (e.g., SAARC COVID-19 Fund), and disaster relief have enhanced its regional image and fostered cooperation in non-political areas.
- **Political Tensions Remain the Main Obstacle:** Despite India's constructive engagement, political tensions especially with Pakistan have disrupted SAARC summits and hindered collective decision-making. Bilateral disputes often spill over into multilateral forums, stalling progress.

### Suggestions

- **Separate Bilateral Issues from Multilateral Forums:** India and other SAARC members should ensure that bilateral conflicts, especially Indo-Pak tensions, do not obstruct the functioning and agenda of SAARC as a regional body.
- **Strengthen Economic Integration through Trade Facilitation:** India should lead in removing non-tariff barriers, simplifying customs procedures, and improving infrastructure to enhance intra-regional trade under SAFTA.
- **Promote Sub-Regional Connectivity as a Complement, Not a Substitute:** While initiatives like BBIN and BIMSTEC are valuable, India should use them to complement SAARC rather than bypass it, to maintain inclusive regionalism.
- **Revive Regular SAARC Summits and Ministerial Meetings:** India should take diplomatic initiatives to resume stalled SAARC summits, which are crucial for maintaining dialogue and trust among member nations.
- **Invest in Digital and People-to-People Diplomacy:** India can foster regional identity and cooperation by expanding scholarship programs, cultural exchanges, and regional digital platforms for education and health.
- **Enhance Transparency and Inclusivity in Decision-Making:** India should involve smaller SAARC countries

more actively in planning and execution of regional initiatives to promote mutual trust and equitable participation.

- **Support Regional Disaster Management and Health Infrastructure:** India can take the lead in establishing regional rapid response teams and shared health databases to tackle future pandemics and natural calamities.

### Conclusion

India plays a central role in SAARC due to its size, economy, and strategic importance. It has contributed significantly to trade, health, education, and regional connectivity. However, SAARC's progress is hindered by political tensions, especially between India and Pakistan, which often block regional cooperation.

Despite this, India has shown leadership through alternative platforms like BBIN and BIMSTEC, demonstrating its commitment to regional development. India's use of soft power, including humanitarian aid and educational programs, also strengthens regional ties.

To make SAARC effective again, India must promote dialogue, resolve political issues diplomatically, and ensure inclusive participation. India's responsible and visionary leadership is essential to transforming SAARC into a meaningful instrument for peace and prosperity in South Asia.

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