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## **Issue Brief**

# **19th SAARC Summit: Prospects and Challenges**

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The 18th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit concluded in Kathmandu, Nepal on November 27, 2014. What was the outcome of this summit? In the words of Sharmadha Srinivasan, (an economist and a researcher at 'Gateway House' think tank based in India and a regular columnist for The Diplomat and The Political Indian), "Disappointing!"<sup>1</sup> Now, the 19th SAARC Summit is scheduled to take place in Islamabad in November 2016, and questions regarding its prospects and challenges are already being raised.

This paper will briefly discuss the current prospects and challenges for the upcoming 19th SAARC Summit that will be hosted by Islamabad, Pakistan on November 9 and 10, 2016. Given the 31 years history of SAARC, the prospects and chances of success for the 19th SAARC Summit seem to be extremely bleak. South Asia is a region plagued by many crisis, menaces and problems such as poverty, unemployment, bad governance, corruption, illiteracy and terrorism. Although the historical background of SAARC is very discouraging, but it is imperative to hope and work for a better outcome of the upcoming 19th SAARC summit.

South Asia as a region is an extremely complex one to begin with. To understand its demographic and political culture, one must have a thorough understanding and knowledge of the region's history. An intensive study of the region's history will give a better understanding of the reasons why South Asia is still a volatile and disconnected region in this age of globalisation and interdependence.

South Asia can be understood better in the light of the "New Regionalism Theory" presented by Björn Hettne and Fredrick Söderbaum in the book, "Theories of New Regionalism."<sup>2</sup> In this book, under the light of the above mentioned theory, it has been assessed how much South Asia has integrated as a region and what are the reasons for its failure to achieve this goal of regional unity.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thedi diplomat.com/2014/12/saarc-summit-debriefing/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/5773398/Theories\\_of\\_New\\_Regionalism](http://www.academia.edu/5773398/Theories_of_New_Regionalism)

It is the duty and responsibility of all the heads of state and heads of government of the SAARC member states to work for the progress and development, not only of their own respective countries, but the entire region as a whole.

The challenges faced by the upcoming 19th SAARC Summit include issues like terrorism, imbalance of trade, lack of investment, smuggling, poverty and illiteracy. Leaders of the SAARC member states need to address these sensitive issues seriously and in an objective manner because the lack of political will has always been a challenge for SAARC forum to reach proper consensus and get things done. It is imperative that the leaders of SAARC states go beyond mere verbal agreements and take tangible, concrete steps in the implementation of decisions taken at the SAARC forum regarding resolution of bilateral and multilateral issues.

Trade and connectivity are the two main components for regional integration and South Asia immensely lacks in both areas. It is one of the least economically integrated regions in the world today.<sup>3</sup> One of the main challenges for the member states to make the 19th SAARC Summit a success would be to overcome these problems on priority basis. Without further enhancement and progress in these areas, South Asia as a region cannot prosper. According to Jhinuk Chowdhury, "political reconciliation cannot be found without creating economic interdependence in the region. Ultimately, all efforts have to start from the economics of South Asia..."<sup>4</sup>

Energy deficiency, environment degradation, climate change, and spread of epidemics are some of the many existential challenges being faced by SAARC member states. The 19th SAARC Summit need to take serious note of these challenges to the region in order for its success and that of the organisation overall.

The main challenge that lies ahead for the success of the 19th SAARC Summit is the lack of trust and proper communication between the member states, especially between Pakistan and India. Review of literature regarding the previous SAARC Summits reveal the fact that bilateral politics

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cfr.org/economics/economics-influence-china-india-south-asia/p36862>

<sup>4</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/is-there-any-hope-for-saarc/>

and rivalry between Pakistan and India overshadows and marginalises the SAARC proceedings. Regardless of the merits and demerits on either sides of bilateral issues between Pakistan and India, they (bilateral issues) always manage to poison the SAARC waters from the outset. Tension between Pakistan and India over recent events that took place in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IoK) is an example of bilateral politics adversely effecting the upcoming SAARC summit in November. How will this challenge be tackled by the member states in the upcoming summit would be a real test regarding the organisation's efficacy.

For the success of the upcoming summit and SAARC to become a vibrant regional organisation, the member states need to have a strong political will to work things out among themselves. Improvement of bilateral relations between Pakistan and India is yet another key factor for the success of the upcoming summit and SAARC. Development of regional identity amongst the people of the South Asian region is of utmost significance. Without such identity development, forging a durable regional integration will always be a dream. As the largest state in the region, India needs to settle its disputes and quarrels with rest of the small member states of SAARC and behave as a mature state. It will help develop mutual trust and understanding which is important for developing long lasting alliances. Territorial integrity of other SAARC member states should be respected. Existential issues should be discussed and resolved such as economic issues, energy deficiency, health, corruption and illiteracy. This will help SAARC states to reach a consensus as all states are facing these problems and all the states will better understand the positions of other member states.

Apart from bilateral political issues between SAARC member states, there is another point that is casting shadows of tension over the upcoming 19th SAARC Summit. The point is related to giving a 'full member' status to China. Currently, China is an observer state in SAARC. Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh took the initiative in 2005 of making China an observer state. India, Afghanistan and Bhutan were against this move from the very beginning. India has reservations regarding China's full membership in SAARC because the former believes that the SAARC was exclusively for South Asian states only and China does not belong to the region. Besides that, India believes that South Asia is its area of influence (as it is the largest state of the region) and

China's inclusion in SAARC as a full member would undermine its dominance in the region. Although China has been able to establish good contacts with all the SAARC member states and working closely with them. Its trade volume with South Asian states has increased significantly from USD\$5.7 billion in 2000 to USD\$93 billion in 2012.<sup>5</sup> This point is on the upcoming SAARC Summit's agenda and intensely heated debate is expected to take place on it.

The prospects for the success of the 19th SAARC Summit are not encouraging. Due to the recent Kashmir (IoK) unrest, the upcoming SAARC Summit is shrouded in uncertainty. The age old blame-game between Pakistan and India has erupted again with Indian Prime Minister Modi taking jabs at Pakistan<sup>6</sup> and the latter reciprocating in kind.<sup>7</sup> The Indian leadership, besides giving heated statements regarding leaving the issue of Kashmir in discussions with Pakistan on all forums is also acting in an irresponsible manner which is turning things towards further escalation between the two biggest SAARC member states.

The recent boycott of Indian Foreign Minister Arun Jaitley of the Ministerial Conference of SAARC in August,<sup>8</sup> the sudden bursting out of the Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh from the SAARC Interior Ministers' meeting on August 4,<sup>9</sup> and the refusal of four SAARC member states (India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Maldives) to send their finance ministers to the Ministerial Conference in Pakistan and the refusal of India for bilateral talks with Pakistan on the sidelines of SAARC<sup>10</sup> are clear indications that many of the SAARC member states, especially India, are not willing to resolve issues through negotiations. The behaviour of some member states of SAARC towards the upcoming 19th Summit in Pakistan is indicating the lack of political will of those states to work for the progress of the region and establishment of good relations among

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/images/publications/workshops/2013-China.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/pm-narendra-modi-balochistan-independence-day-congress-pakistan-salman-khurshid-2977554/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/narendra-modi-crossed-red-line-by-talking-about-balochistan-pakistan/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1168294/india-refuses-attend-saarc-conference-pakistan/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1156487/the-problem-with-saarc/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1152195/rajnaths-visit-new-delhi-rules-bilateral-meetings/>

neighbouring states. A senior Pakistani official went on to say that given the current hostility between Pakistan and India, it won't be a surprise if the 19th SAARC Summit is postponed.<sup>11</sup>

The prospects for the success of this summit do seem feeble because half the member states are not willing to attend the Summit to discuss serious issues that are pending for long. The other half of the attending member states either do not yield that much power and influence in the region, or they are participating half-heartedly. Although Pakistan is hosting the 19th SAARC Summit, but the success of this summit does not lie entirely on Pakistan. Other SAARC member countries also share this responsibility.

For the sake of their own nations' and the region's (South Asia) progress and prosperity, the leaders of all the member states need to put their differences aside, avoid position taking and should return to the negotiating table for the peaceful and durable resolution of existing issues. For the achievement of these goals, the 19th SAARC Summit provides the best platform to all South Asian states. It will not only help in diffusing political tensions amongst the neighbouring states, but it will also help in improving economic and social cooperation as well. Trust deficit can be reduced only by discussion, dialogue and communication. In that, the 19th SAARC Summit should not be seen lacking.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1167339/kashmir-unrest-saarc-summit-shrouded-uncertainty/>