

INDIA AND THE PROPOSED SAARC SUMMIT IN ISLAMABAD

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On the 6th of January 2022, Arindam Bagchi, the official spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, dismissed the Pakistani offer to host the 19th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation SAARC summit in Islamabad as earlier proposed by Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.¹ India has been reluctant to attend the hosting of SAARC by Pakistan since the Uri attack of 2016. Following the 18th SAARC summit that was held back in 2014 in Nepal, India pulled out of the 19th SAARC summit that was scheduled to be held in Islamabad on 15th November 2016, citing the reason to be Pakistan's alleged involvement in the attack carried out on an Indian army camp in Uri, Kashmir two months earlier. Ever since the attack, the Indian government has been unwilling to join any regional conference supposed to be hosted by Pakistan. The recent dismissal of Pakistan's offer by the Indian authorities is yet another blow to the two countries' diplomatic ties.²

After the Indian External Ministry released its press briefing to Pakistan's proposal, Pakistan's Foreign Office reiterated its offer by stating that India could join the conference virtually if its leaders

1 Express News Service. "No Consensus on Holding of SAARC Summit: India." *The Indian Express*, January 7, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-pakistan-saarc-summit-7710481/>.

2 Siddiqui, Naveed. "Pakistan Rejects 'tendentious' Indian Claims About Saarc Summit, Occupied Kashmir." DAWN.COM. January 7, 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1668148>.

were unwilling to join physically.³ The statement was followed by Pakistan's Foreign Minister urging India not to halt other regional countries from joining the summit.⁴ FM Qureshi maintained that the rise of Hindutva proclivities in India had caused deterioration of bilateral ties and seriously damaged the potential of regional cooperation. Bilateral relations remained frozen after India revoked Kashmir's special political status and relations could not be normalized unless the Kashmir issue was resolved, he added.⁵

Realistically speaking, SAARC has remained dysfunctional ever since its establishment in 1985. It has never been instrumental in solving critical issues being faced by South Asian states. Nevertheless, Pakistan tries to make SAARC functional and be more effective for the peace and prosperity of the region.⁶ Ironically, the primary reason for India not attending the SAARC is its long-standing commitment to isolate Pakistan regionally. India is preoccupied with maintaining its hegemony in the South Asian region and perceives Pakistan and the summit organized by Islamabad as a threat to its hegemony.⁷

Instead of making SAARC functional, New Delhi is looking forward to formulating Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal BBIN, which is a sub-regional architecture that meets through the official representation of member states reviewing the quadrilateral agreements across areas such as water resources management, connectivity of power, transport and infrastructure.⁸ India is also a part of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation BIMSTEC, which is a direct result of India's Look East Policy, which aims to connect South Asia with countries of South East Asia. Some experts suggest that BIMSTEC can replace SAARC in efficacy as it has clear and well-

3 "Saarc: If Not in Person, Join Virtually: Pakistan Invites India for 19th SAARC Summit - Times of India." *The Times of India*. January 3, 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/if-not-in-person-join-virtually-pakistan-invites-india-for-19th-saarc-summit/articleshow/88670319.cms>.

4 "Implacable Failures of the SAARC." *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*. August 2, 2019. <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/implacable-failures-of-the-saarc/>.

5 Ibid.

6 Bhattacharjee, Joyeeta. "SAARC Vs BIMSTEC: The Search for the Ideal Platform for Regional Cooperation." ORF. March 21, 2018. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/saarc-vs-bimstec-the-search-for-the-ideal-platform-for-regional-cooperation/>.

7 "Why India Is Undermining The Integrity Of The SAARC?". February 26, 2021. *Daily Times*. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/564934/why-india-is-undermining-the-integrity-of-the-saarc/>.

8 "India explores the scope for power trade with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal". 2015. *Economic Times* http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-31/news/58650561_1_power-trade-the-jwg-inter-grid-connectivity

defined economic agendas.⁹ These sub-regional and interregional approaches adopted by India explain why it is not desperately interested in SAARC.¹⁰

It is pertinent to mention here that Pakistan's new national security policy stressing greater emphasis on geo-economics is a ray of hope for a possible thaw with India. A Pakistani senior official has unveiled that "economic security will be the central theme of the new national security policy," "We are not seeking hostility with India for the next 100 years. The new policy seeks peace with immediate neighbours," the official said.¹¹ India ought to overhaul its foreign policy and ponder over Pakistan's offers. Peace and economic diplomacy are the need of the hour. Under the current juncture, both India and Pakistan are more vulnerable to non-traditional threats than so-called imaginary traditional threats.¹²

Meanwhile, Pakistan could orchestrate other initiatives; it provides a natural link between Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO states to connect the Eurasian heartland with the Arabian Sea and the rest of South Asia. Islamabad can expand its economic sphere by stretching its relations to Central Asia, China and even Russia, offering critical overland routes for mutually beneficial trade. Pakistan can strengthen its bilateral ties with South Asian states by utilizing its diplomatic channels.

It can be argued that the return of the Taliban in Kabul has accelerated the anxieties of India as it marks the end of its long-standing influence and investment in Afghanistan. Not only has its impact withered away in Afghanistan, but it can also no longer utilize the Afghan soil against Pakistan. This has enhanced the desperate Indian attempts to isolate Pakistan regionally. Pakistan recently hosted a successful meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) foreign ministers on Afghanistan, which manifested Islamabad's role as a crucial player in the region. In short, by not joining the SAARC summit in Pakistan, India is not serving the cause of regional economic integration. In the larger socio-economic interests of South Asia, India needs to review its approach to SAARC.

⁹ "Pakistan's Strategies in Central Asia | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses." Manohar Parrikar, *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, January 9, 2022. https://idsa.in/strategicanalysis/PakistansStrategiesinCentralAsia_msroy_1006.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "New Security Policy Seeks 'peace' with India." *The Express Tribune*, January 11, 2022. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2338212/new-security-policy-seeks-peace-with-india>.

¹² Ibid.