



Special Guest Articles

Enhancing Regional Cooperation: Pakistan's Role in Revitalizing SAARC

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Regional cooperation has been key to economic growth, political stability, and cultural harmony in organizations like the EU, ASEAN, and SCO. Despite South Asia's vast population and development potential, it remains one of the least integrated regions. SAARC could provide a crucial platform to address shared challenges and enhance collaboration.

As a founding SAARC member, Pakistan has consistently promoted regional cooperation. It supported the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and its Additional Protocol, even agreeing to provisions on terrorism definitions that remain unresolved in the UN's draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT).

Pakistan also backed the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement at the twelfth summit in 2004 hosted by it, aiming to reduce trade barriers despite domestic reservations. Earlier, it had agreed to the India-led South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993, focused on trade liberalization.

To support trade liberalization under SAARC, Pakistan took an accommodating stance during the 2009–2012 Composite Dialogue with India. It agreed to replace restrictive positive lists with negative lists, allowing open trade for all items not explicitly restricted. Pakistan also considered granting India Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, but India unilaterally suspended the dialogue in 2013, citing unsubstantiated allegations, including LoC violations in Jammu and Kashmir and the beheading of two Indian soldiers.

India has falsely claimed since 1996 to have granted MFN status to Pakistan under WTO provisions, though it never operationalized the measure. Despite this, it used the claim as a propaganda tool in bilateral and international forums while imposing heavy tariffs, para-tariffs, and Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) on Pakistani exports.

In 2012, Pakistan and India agreed on a new visa agreement allowing citizens over 65 years old to enter each other's countries visa-free through land borders. However, India unilaterally suspended the agreement on the day it was to be implemented, sending back a Pakistani senior citizen who had crossed from Wagha to Attari.

Pakistan also approved the opening of the South Asian University in New Delhi, despite concerns about the security of Pakistani students, given the risk of mob violence and targeting of Muslims in India, as well as potential Indian intelligence interference. Pakistan's concerns were validated when India selectively granted visas to Pakistani students, leaving vacancies unfilled. In 2024, India denied visas to all twenty selected Pakistani students.

In 2021, Pakistan shifted from a geopolitical focus on territorial security to a geo-economic framework, prioritizing economic connectivity, regional integration, and diplomacy. A key part of this shift involved considering westward transit access for India, contingent on addressing Pakistan's core concerns. These changes had the potential to foster regional peace and economic prosperity by easing tensions with India.

The renewed focus on regional peace and strengthened trade relations, further held the promise of SAARC's revival and paving the way for the operationalization of the SAFTA. Earlier, last year Pakistan's Foreign Minister expressed a commitment to reviving economic and trade ties with India. These unilateral offers were, unfortunately, largely ignored by India, dismissing them as attempts by Pakistan to alleviate its economic difficulties, thus missing significant opportunities.

Over the years, SAARC has made progress in regional cooperation by establishing centres such as the Arbitration Council (2005) and the Energy Centre in Pakistan; the Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre in Nepal; the SAARC Cultural Centre in Sri Lanka; and the Centre for Agriculture and Disaster Management in Bangladesh.

Additionally, SAARC has adopted key instruments such as the Social Charter (2004) for the welfare of women, children, youth, and the disabled, as well as agreements on Avoidance of Double Taxation (2005), Customs Assistance (2005), the South Asian Regional Standards Organization (2008), and Trade in Services (2010). The organization has also addressed issues like terrorism, drug trade, and crime through the Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1990) and the Convention on Criminal Matters (2008).

Despite these achievements, SAARC has remained largely inactive for the past eight years, particularly after India boycotted the November 2016 summit in Pakistan and managed to pressure most member states to follow suit, except Nepal. Notably, most SAARC summit postponements have resulted from India's manipulations or refusals to attend, often citing bilateral issues. Moreover, India's obstruction has not been limited just to summits scheduled in Pakistan.

In 1988, the fourth SAARC summit could not be held in Sri Lanka owing to the Indian interference and support to Tamil separatists. Subsequently, India forced Sri Lanka to accept the so-called 'Indian Peace Keeping Forces' (IPKF) in the Jaffna peninsula. The IPKF failed to achieve its promised objective of peace, resulting in Sri Lankan demand of their withdrawal from its territory and the postponement of the fifth summit in 1989. The sixth Summit in Bangladesh, in 1991, was delayed after Bhutan's King, ostensibly at the behest of India, expressed his inability to attend citing internal strife.

India also withdrew from the seventh summit in Dhaka in 1992 due to the protests in Bangladesh over the Babri Mosque demolition. The twelfth summit scheduled in Pakistan in January 2002 was postponed due to India's refusal to confirm its participation and was eventually held in January 2004. India boycotted the thirteenth summit in Dhaka in January 2005, citing security concerns in Bangladesh and Nepal, delaying it until November 2005. Finally, India's refusal to attend the nineteenth summit in Islamabad in November 2016 has effectively stalled SAARC's progress on regional cooperation.

In parallel, India has sought to undermine SAARC by initiating alternative sub-regional cooperation platforms that exclude Pakistan, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework. However, Sri Lanka and Nepal, both members of BIMSTEC, have emphasized that they do not see these platforms as a replacement for

SAARC, with Nepal in particular reiterating the importance of SAARC in fostering regional cooperation. Nepal has also expressed its support for convening the SAARC Summit, which has not been held since 2014.

Despite India's refusal to revive the SAARC Summit process or participate meaningfully in other activities, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not miss the opportunity of grandstanding during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic to call a virtual meeting of SAARC Heads of State/Government. In the spirit of upholding collective benefit, Pakistan's Health Minister participated in the virtual meeting supporting coordinated regional responses to the health crisis. Pakistan also contributed to SAARC's COVID-19 response, providing in-kind support to several members.

Meanwhile, India's relationship with the SAARC members that had supported its boycott of the Summit in Pakistan -- viz Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives -- has suffered significant challenges in the recent years.

The collapse of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's pro-India government in Bangladesh and the coming of Professor Muhammad Yunus's interim government, less inclined toward India, strained relations between the two countries. In meetings with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif at international events, Prof. Yunus called for reviving SAARC to boost economic cooperation and regional ties.

Bhutan, wary of India's influence in its internal and external affairs, has shown a visible desire for a more independent foreign policy. This has been exemplified by its recent border negotiations directly with China, conducted without India's involvement.

Similarly, Sri Lanka's new President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, has distanced himself from India, advocating its reduced influence over national affairs. After securing just 3.2% of the vote in the 2019 presidential election, he won in 2024; a victory many Indian analysts attribute to the Chinese factor.

The case of Afghanistan's Taliban-led interim government participation in SAARC remains in limbo, though India has established liaison with it.

Meanwhile, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu, elected on an "India Out" campaign, is reducing India's military presence and pivoting toward China.

Though Nepal did not join the nineteenth summit boycott, its tensions have risen over India's display of an "Akhand Bharat" map in its new parliament, depicting Nepal as part of India. In response, Nepal released its own map, including territories claimed by both the countries. Water sharing and hydropower also remain longstanding issues between them.

These shifts reflect a changing dynamic in the region, with SAARC nations making a pushback on India's attempt to dominate their foreign and internal policies.

If India continues to block the revival of SAARC, Pakistan could take several steps to re-energize the organization. Engaging with the other member states that share an interest in revitalizing SAARC and advocating for structural reforms within the organization are viable options. The unanimous consent of all members could be changed by two-thirds or a simple majority willing to participate and even allow representation at the Ministerial level, thus keeping the organization functional despite political standoffs. Reaching out to civil society is another workable option, which could have an incremental effect.

SAARC Secretary General Golam Sarwar visited Pakistan from 20 to 24 May 2024 on his introductory tour of member states. Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif reaffirmed Pakistan's support for SAARC and its desire to host the nineteenth summit soon. Highlighting the stalemate, the Secretary General stressed the need for regional integration, and mutual cooperation for prosperity, warning of the cost of inaction.

Even within India, there are dissenting voices on the SAARC blockade. Defence analyst Pravin Sawhney argues that the Modi government's reluctance to normalize ties with Pakistan is driven by ideology and politics, making SAARC's revival unlikely. Conversely, Radhika Moondra, a researcher at Rajasthan University, Jaipur, contends that India should facilitate SAARC's revival to strengthen the Global South. She emphasizes SAARC's unique potential to connect South Asia with Central Asia and the Middle East, a role BIMSTEC and BBIN cannot fulfill.

In conclusion, while the challenges facing SAARC are considerable, they are not insurmountable. Pakistan remains steadfast in its commitment to regional cooperation and believes in SAARC's potential to promote peace and prosperity in South Asia. By addressing contentious issues through dialogue, institutional reform, and a renewed focus on shared economic goals, SAARC could become a force for positive change in the region. However, this will require a collective effort from all member states, especially India, to re-engage meaningfully in the process. The renewed interest of the majority of SAARC members and keen attention by the Secretary General SAARC could pave the way to bring SAARC back on track.
