

## Focus 76 – 'SAARC's dysfunctionality and China's foot at South Asia's Door

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### Abstract

The South Asian region is experiencing a shift in power dynamics. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has faced difficulties in reaching its potential, and India has played a great role in such difficulties. On the other hand, China's involvement in the region creates new challenges for the regional body. This article aims to discuss why the SAARC has such trouble developing – and what role India plays in these dynamics. The article also discusses China's engagement in the region and what future awaits the SAARC after the Taliban Takeover.

### Keywords

India, China, Regional Integration, South Asia, SAARC

## Introduction

Chinese influence in South Asia has been expanding in recent years. The Belt and Road initiative has contributed immensely to this growth. Now China is playing an increased role in the regional dynamics of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) by providing economic assistance to member states. China enjoys an ever-better relationship with South Asia's smaller nations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and so on (Ghimire & Pathak, 2021). Unlike western nations, unlike even the so-called regional Big Brother that is India, China approaches South Asian nations as equals and focuses on common challenges. South Asian countries therefore view China as a partner – a partner that makes larger investments and undertakes development projects at a faster pace than any other power (Carnegie India, 2021). China does not dwell on social factors when improving its relations with South Asian countries. Beijing is not much concerned about democratic values and human rights; it certainly does not let deals be affected by such considerations. This encourages as countries such as Afghanistan to engage with China in trade talks and bilateral agreements. From being Bangladesh's most important arms dealer to pragmatic action such as diplomatic relief during the India-Nepal border conflict, China has made huge developments in exerting its influence amongst South Asia's small states (US institute of peace, 2020).

India, being the largest country in the region (both in terms of territory and economy), has of course a huge influence in the South Asian region. Most small South Asian states depend on India from an economic standpoint. For instance, India is Nepal's largest trading partner – both public and private Indian sectors have invested in the country. India and Nepal also engage in bilateral cooperation when it comes to water resources. Examples include the Joint Ministerial Commission for Water Resources (JMCWR), the Joint Committee on Water Resources (JCWR) and the Joint Standing Technical Committee (JSTC; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal website, undated). Bangladesh too has many economic ties with India. India is one of the most important sources of the country's imports. India and Bangladesh also cooperate over the use of rivers as concerns flood control, irrigation, and power generation (Islam2004). Moreover, India shares cultural similarities with its neighbouring countries – which makes New Delhi 'less foreign' in its regional

involvement.

With the recent Taliban takeover and the growing Chinese footprint in the South Asian region, the SAARC needs to redeem itself now more than never. One could well speculate on the possibility that the Taliban takeover and the Chinese influence in the region could encourage a new alliance between China, Pakistan, and the new Afghanistan. This could mean the end of cooperation amongst SAARC member states, as such developments would be against the interests of India and of the countries who depend on India. In other words, China would have to take sides, which would clearly end any future attempts of cooperation amongst SAARC's member states.

### **Genesis of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**

After the decolonization of the South Asian region in 1947, the new political map divided peoples. The region became one of the most economically disintegrated areas in the world. After several attempts at resolving these issues via bilateral relations, in 1985 a regional body called the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was born. The SAARC initially comprised 7 members - India, Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Afghanistan joined in 2005. The SAARC also involves 9 observers, including the EU, the USA, Japan, and China. Being at the time inspired by other successful regional organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the EU, the SAARC's leaders aimed at a boost in intra-regional trade and investment. However, the SAARC's efficiency was deemed slow. The SAARC was set up to ensure the welfare of the citizens in the region, increase economic trade and promote peace as well as cooperation in the region. All member states were battling similar problems such as poverty, terrorism, extremism, social and political tensions, etc. (Haran 2018).

The SAARC is represented by its secretary general on an international platform. The SAARC secretariat is based in Nepal. It monitors the implementation of activities and serves as a channel of communication between the Association and its member states (as well as other regional organizations). The Secretary General,

who is appointed by the member countries' Council of Ministers in alphabetical order for a three-year term, heads the Secretariat. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon from Sri Lanka is the current Secretary General (2020-2023). Previous Secretaries General came from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The next Secretary General is to be from Bhutan. Seven Directors on deputation from member states assist the Secretary General. The SAARC Secretariat and its member states observe 8 December as the SAARC's Charter Day (Iqbal 2006).

One of the SAARC's most commendable achievements is called the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Succeeding the SAARC's Preferential Agreement, the SAAFTA has been notable in more ways than one. For example, the 2006 tariff reduction plan has been successfully carried out in two phases. India and Pakistan lowered tariffs on goods to 20% in 2 years, while other countries reduced tariffs to 30% in 3 years. In the second phase, India and Pakistan reduced tariffs to 0-5% in 5 years; it took 7 years for other countries to achieve the same action. The SAARC has also made it clear that it is willing to cooperate with foreign countries so that these can invest in financial intermediation, resource integration, technology transfer, market development and educational support. Observers such as Japan have provided aid for disaster prevention and social infrastructure construction. China has also provided aid through donations to the South Asian Development Fund and has put in relentless effort in running the South Asian Commodity Fair and the China-South Asia Business Forum (Jiali 2012).

The SAARC has many regional centres as well. These regional centres cover Agriculture, Tuberculosis, Documentation, Meteorological Research, and Human Resource Development. They were established in different SAARC capitals: the SAARC Agricultural Centre (Dhaka, 1998), the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS centre (Kathmandu, 1992), the SAARC Energy Centre (Islamabad, 1989), the SAARC Cultural Centre (Colombo, 2009) and the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (2016). In addition, three new regional centres covering Culture, Coastal Zones Management, and Information are currently being established (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation's Development Fund website, Undated).

## Leading causes of the SAARC's dysfunctionalities

While the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has thus certainly achieved much, regional organisation faces various challenges in its aim to reach an optimum level of efficiency. The Kashmir border dispute is one of the major issues limiting the SAARC's growth. The SAARC still lacks an efficient platform to discuss and tackle issues relating to terrorism in the region (Muzaffar, Jathol & Yaseen 2017). Another key factor that contributes to a sluggish mode of progress is the number of cancelled meetings. The SAARC has a history of member state leaders refusing to attend the summit due to bilateral conflicts. For instance, in 2016, Pakistan was supposed to host the SAARC's 19<sup>th</sup> Summit; however, India refused to participate due to Islamabad's involvement in the Uri attack (The Hindu, 2016). The "Uri attack refers to the grenade attacks carried out by four terrorists near the town of Uri in the Indian Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It was reported as "the deadliest attack on security forces in Kashmir in two decades"". Other member states pulled out of the summit as well. Rather than using the SAARC's platform to communicate and resolve security conflicts, member states often simply refuse to address issues and take action in the name of national interest – and usually in a rogue manner. Recently, the SAARC Foreign Ministerial Level meeting was cancelled due to the possible presence of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Prime Minister Modi expressed his concerns regarding the new Afghan government's legitimacy and refused to participate in the meeting on equal footing with the Taliban (The Indian Express, 2021). All these actions affect political relations between member states and contribute to rising multilateral tensions in the region.

Moreover, India has adopted a hegemonic strategy. It tries to compel SAARC member states to align themselves with Indian national interests (Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2017). This of course does not too well with India's neighbours. India is the SAARC's largest member in terms of both population and territory. New Delhi therefore sees itself as a regional hegemon, a view that is not shared by other SAARC states. Of course, strained relations between India and Pakistan also affect the SAARC's functioning. Until these two countries become capable of sorting out their security issues, other member states will always be caught in the crossfire. (Falak 2017)

There are many bilateral tensions between South Asian states. Pakistan and Afghanistan have border disputes over the Durand line. In 1947, after Pakistan became independent, it inherited the territory bordered by the Durand line, a fact that Afghanistan refuses to recognize. In fact, the only country to vote against Pakistan joining the United Nations in 1947 was Afghanistan (Subramanian, 2021). Nepal and Bhutan have yet to resolve the ever so famous Lhotshampa expulsion. The Lhotshampa expulsion concerned an ethnic group originated in Nepal. In the 1990s, Bhutan expelled 100,00 people – which makes Bhutan the biggest creator of refugees per capita in the world (Mørch, 2016).

India has issues with all of its neighbours; Pakistan is just a specific instance. India and Bangladesh have been fighting over water management of the river Ganges. India has faced criticism over the 1996 Ganges Treaty, a legally binding document that favours the hydro-hegemonic state. India and Nepal have tussled over water management in the Makhali river, as well as over cartographic border issues in Kalapani and Lipulekh. India has also been criticised regarding its action in the Sri Lankan and Ceylon Tamilian issue. Voicing out support to the Tamilians at first, India later supported Sri Lanka in its war with the Tamil ethnic community. India also refused refugee status to these Tamilians (Nag & Bandyopadhyay 2020).

With all these bilateral disputes, the SAARC's proper functioning becomes almost impossible. The region needs to separate its security issues from its potential economic prospects. Only then can some development be expected. The SAARC should be a platform used to address multilateral economic prospects, as well as cooperation amongst states in times of need. It should not be a platform used to discuss bilateral conflicts. Member states need to see the bigger picture if they want the regional body to be sustained.

Dynamics between small and large states constitute yet another reason for the continuing mistrust in the region. India is seen by its small neighbours as a country who aspires dominance in the South Asian region. The country has not done much to resolve this issue diplomatically; in fact, it has done the opposite. The SAARC's full potential can never be achieved as long as New Delhi does not open diplomatic dialogues with small state members – and assure them that the country sees them as an equal, not wishing to assert dominance in the region. (Aryal 2016)

## India and SAARC

Before addressing the role of India in the SAARC, we need to first address India's Neighbourhood policy. The first Indian Neighbourhood policy focuses on peaceful relations with neighbouring countries and concentrates on developing the entire region via cooperative methods. India has made relentless investments in its neighbours and participates in several development projects. However, under current Prime Minister Modi, the Neighbourhood policy has been receiving some criticism. Although Modi's enthusiastic visits gave us all hope on a better, globally represented India – with better relations with its neighbours, trade cooperation and elimination of security dilemmas (except as regards Pakistan) – this sentiment did not last long. India's neighbourhood policy has not been consistent and often positions are taken which solely favours one's own national interests. Currently, India maintains strained relations with all its neighbours (Aryal 2021).

If India wishes to contribute to the SAARC's better functioning it must first concentrate on its Neighbourhood policy and provide assurance to smaller states, through any necessary diplomatic method, that New Delhi recognises every country's sovereignty and does not wish to assert hegemonic dominance.

Cooperation between India and rest of the SAARC's members is also much injured by China's increasing involvement in the region. For China, too, has invested a lot in South Asia. The South Asian region is a key geo-political location for the implementation of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. India's position on Chinese involvement in the region is clear – New Delhi wants them out. India does not need a new, external threat that challenges its position in the region. For China is clearly considered a threat. Chinese influence in the region could also mean competition for India, something else New Delhi would gladly do without (The Hindu Business Line, 2020). Growing tensions in India regarding Chinese involvement are understandable, considering that 6 out of 8 SAARC members (Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka) have signed the Chinese BRI policy. Chinese involvement in South Asia and chances for an effective SAARC are inversely proportional. Hence there is a huge conflict of interest between India and SAARC member states. The greater the Chinese footprint in the region, the lesser the chances of cooperation between India and SAARC member countries.

## Recent Developments

Post-BRI Chinese involvement in South Asia started with Pakistan. China and Pakistan enjoy excellent bilateral relations as they bond over their common enemy – India. This gives full meaning to the saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ (Rajeswari, P R, 2017). The two countries support each other on various controversial issues. Pakistan recognizes China’s One China Policy. China encourages Pakistan to safeguard its territorial sovereignty, independence, and security. China expressed its concern over India’s decision to strip Jammu and Kashmir of its special status and voiced an opinion in favour of Pakistan (Scroll Staff, 2020). Furthermore, Pakistan rarely criticises China’s treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. China also requires Pakistan’s support for implementing its BRI policy. Beijing seems to believe that Pakistan is going to come in handy in implementing its strategy in Afghanistan – especially now after the Taliban takeover. On the other side of South Asia, China has improved its relations with both Bangladesh and Nepal. China has been making tremendous investments in Bangladesh as a part of their BRI strategy. More than economic cooperation, China and Bangladesh have pledged to deepen their defence cooperation. China is also the largest arms supplier to Bangladesh, as it accounted for almost 71.8 percent of weapons imported from 2008 to 2018. This automatically makes China irreplaceable for Bangladesh (Grossman 2020). China and Nepal have been improving their bilateral relations recently. There are several BRI projects happening in Nepal, for instance the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network and connectivity projects including ports, highways, railways, aviation, and communications. The launch of a feasibility study regarding the China-Nepal cross-border railway was recently announced (Zhao 2020). Analysing relations between Sri Lanka and China, Westerners often hold that Sri Lanka is a victim of a Chinese debt trap. Instead of paying down Colombo’s BRI debt, the Chinese led Sri Lanka in December 2017 to hand over the Hambantota port on a 99-year lease. Hambantota is strategically located on the Indian Ocean, potentially bolstering Beijing’s String of Pearls. (Hussain 2021)

Being one of the first countries to recognize the Taliban takeover over the Afghan government, China is wills to be in good terms with the new Afghan government. Beijing is concerned about Taliban takeover solely due to security reasons, as it fears that Islamic militarism could motivate the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang conflict.

China also will use this change of governance to urge the Taliban not to provide aid to the Uyghur minority (Haas 2021). The latest Chinese involvement in South Asia is recognising the new rulers of Afghanistan. China grabbed the opportunity to be one of the first ones to recognize the new Afghan government, thus further entrenching the support of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Furthermore, China provided Afghanistan with an aid of 31 million dollars, including food supplies and corona virus vaccines (BBC 2021). India itself does not recognize the new Afghan government – and the SAARC as a regional body dis yet to express any comment on the events. Afghanistan’s inclusion in the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) is also being discussed among the Chinese and Pakistani governments (Greenfield, 2021). China has become involved in the Afghan peace process. Beijing has even offered to host the Afghan peace talks, which no other South Asian country has ever done before (except for Pakistan). China has made it clear that it expects an end to this long war and acknowledges that the Taliban play an important role in the processes of peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan (Reuters, 2021). It would have been a huge diplomatic victory for the SAARC if the organization had initiated these steps instead of China. China is clearly taking the opportunity provided to them by the SAARC’s inability to perform adequately. Furthermore, small states in South Asia would not need Chinese funding as much if it weren’t for the SAARC’s inability to deliver on its promises.

## Conclusion

The SAARC lies at the brim of survival, with various political scenarios coming into play. As India’s diplomatic ventures are failing and China’s endeavours are succeeding, power dynamics are slowly shifting. India will have to keep up with China’s ability to provide support to smaller states in South Asia. India cannot currently offer as many resources as China. If India wishes to even begin to limit Chinese influence in South Asia, its greatest weapon is to revive the SAARC and make sure it flourishes. India will have to provide meaning to its so called ‘Neighbourhood Policy’ through concrete action – not through words. The first thing India can do is to use the 19<sup>th</sup> summit so as to discuss the new situation in the region: the Taliban takeover. Not only does India need to use regional

platforms to express its concerns; it must remember that regional platforms such as the SAARC are to benefit all member states and not New Delhi alone. All members must be free to voice their opinions regarding any issue they might find important. India depends highly on the West. This is not practical, as the West is geographically far away. India needs to prioritize relations with neighbouring countries. Finally, India simply needs to acknowledge the fact that a larger nation has a larger responsibility in the region. This includes making sure that smaller countries do not feel threatened by Indian national interests. New Delhi must also assist its neighbours so that all can grow together. The SAARC might still have a chance; however, this solely depends on South Asian states' ability to overcome their bilateral issues.

China has made tremendous diplomatic progress compared to the idle SAARC. The SAARC needs to be inspired by EU and ASEAN models. The SAARC can achieve greater international recognition if it manages to be useful as a platform for conducting Afghan Peace talks. Furthermore, the SAARC must use its Development Fund so as to provide aid in the Afghan territory – something, again, that China is doing. The SAARC as a regional body needs to maintain healthy relations with Central Asian countries. The SAARC could also boost its international humanitarian image by accepting refugees in their time of need. The SAARC needs to give full meaning to its initial aim: “to promote economic growth, social progress and cultural development within the South Asia region”.

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