

A Contemporary Examination of Relations Between India And the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

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Abstract:

India and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation will both be discussed during the course of the presentation. In this study, both the beginnings of SAARC and the organization's current standing will be investigated. In addition to this, the paper will explore India's perspective on SAARC, India's ties with the nations that make up SAARC, and India's role in SAARC in fostering regional cooperation across a variety of fields. All of these topics will be covered in the context of SAARC. An in-depth examination of SAARC and the challenges it must overcome is addressed in the report's concluding chapter. However, in the same section, a description is offered as to why SAARC, especially for India, is necessary to confront new problems. This description is presented in the same section.

Keywords —SAARC, Association, Cooperation, Relation, Examination.

I. INTRODUCTION

1945 was a watershed year in our nation's history. World War II, the worst war in history, was finally won by the Allies this year. Also, this year, the Cold War broke out between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the destructive potential of nuclear weapons was demonstrated. The United States and its Western European allies established NATO in 1949, while the Soviet Union and its allies established the Warsaw Pact. The history of South Asia also saw a significant shift at this time. India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and the Maldives are all part of South Asia, a region that accounts for 2.5 percent of the world's surface but currently houses 17% of the global population (Desk, 2018).The decolonization and independence of South Asia began. During the

first half of the twentieth century, the British Empire began to weaken, and the people of South Asia gradually won their independence. Many regional organisations, like the Arab League, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the European Union, and so on, came into being in the middle to late 20th century. There were significant political and economic contrasts among the South Asian nations. Despite this, India and other South Asian nations realised the critical importance of regional friendship and collaboration for achieving lasting peace and prosperity. The South Asian Association for Regional Collaboration (SAARC) was established to actualize and develop this cooperation. In 1985, eight countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—signed the SAARC

Charter, thereby establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation as an intergovernmental and regional organization. In addition to the member states of SAARC, nine other states (the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, Mauritius, the European Union, Iran, Australia, Japan, and Myanmar) hold observer status (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). To wit: Mishra & Roche (2015). Observer states are only allowed to attend the opening and closing sessions of SAARC summits and have no say in the summit's agenda or discussions (Mishra & Roche, 2015). Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, is home to SAARC's headquarters.

According to the SAARC charter, the organization's mission is "to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia; to enhance economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the South Asia region; to strengthen collective self-reliance; to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with developing countries; and to cooperate with international and regional organisations" (About SAARC).

The SAARC Summits (meetings of heads of state), the Council of Ministers, the Standing Committees of Foreign Secretaries, and the Secretariat (responsible for effective implementation of SAARC initiatives and undertakings) are the primary organs of SAARC's organisation (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011). Respect for sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in domestic concerns, and mutual benefit are the five principles upon which SAARC cooperation is built (Migrant Forum in Asia, n.d.). All decisions within SAARC require 100% consensus, and contentious bilateral topics are off-limits (Migrant Forum in Asia, n.d.). Among South Asian regional organisations, SAARC now stands head and shoulders above the others. India, a founding member of SAARC and a country on the cusp of becoming a global superpower, is a significant force within the organisation. This study will analyse the current difficulties encountered by India and SAARC in terms of collaboration in South Asia

by looking at their historical development, India's attitude towards SAARC, and India's interactions with SAARC member nations.

II. TRANSFORMATION OF SAARC OVER TIME

Today, SAARC stands as one of South Asia's most important regional organizations. When compared to earlier regional organisations such as ASEAN (1967), its establishment in 1985 is considered late. To be sure, this doesn't mean the concept of Asian cooperation and unity didn't exist before (Jain, 2005). As cited in Sharma (2001), even before independence, India's leaders saw the value in working to strengthen Asian solidarity and ties with other regions. The All India Congress Committee (AICC) took note of a resolution passed in 1921 by Bombay residents who urged the organisation "to promote feelings of amity and concord with neighbouring states with a view to establishing goodwill and sympathy to formulate a clear and definite foreign policy for India" (Sharma, 2001). The All India Congress (AICC) met in Delhi in 1921 and declared that the Indian government at the time (under British rule) did not reflect Indian opinion and that its policy goal was to subjugate and exploit India. It urged neighbouring and other non-Indian states to avoid hostility toward the people of India and treaties with the Imperial Power (Sharma, 2001). In 1928, Congress passed a resolution (Jain, 2005) advocating for and supporting the creation of an Asian Federation. The Congress's goal, both before and after independence, was Asian integration and cooperation. The Congress, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, aimed to make India the region's central actor. It was Jawaharlal Nehru's belief that the rise of bloc politics as a result of the Cold War would have a devastating effect on the autonomy, independence, and sovereignty of countries, and that small states would have no future and be reduced to satellite states, that led him to oppose this trend.

In 1945, he backed the South Asian Federation's formation, which included India, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Burma. Because of its "non-alignment" policy, India has stayed out of every

major international alliance and bloc. According to India's External Relations (2019), in the 1940s and 1950s, Nehru advocated vigorously for Asian unity. In 1947, the Asian Relations Conference was convened by Nehru to foster regional harmony and cooperation. The organisation of the International Conference in Delhi in 1949 to support Indonesia's freedom struggle against the Dutch (India's External Relations, 2019) was also a significant step in the right direction. The Bandung Conference, or Asian-African Conference, was organised in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia (the ideas of Panchsheel were also incorporated into the conference) after years of effort to organise Asia and Africa. India's interaction with other newly independent Asian and African nations reached a high point at this conference (India's External Relations, 2019). (Jain, 2005) (Sharma, 2001) The efforts to unite Asia and improve regional cooperation in Asia ultimately failed, despite numerous attempts. Multiple causes and explanations contributed to this result. One of the main causes was the Cold War's politics, which resulted in the formation of blocs and division among them and the exertion of great influence and dominance by superpowers over other countries in Asia and Africa. The animosity and tension between India and its neighbours, particularly between India and Pakistan and China, was another major factor. the postcolonial issues of partition, nation-building, integration, and domestic issues faced by countries, etc., as well as the disparate economic development and economic issues such as inflation, balance of payment issues, etc. (Jain, 2005).

Although India had a policy of maintaining good relations with its neighbours during Indira Gandhi's time as prime minister, this policy of "good neighborliness" and bilateral cooperation with South Asian nations was overshadowed by India's projection of power and, by extension, its projection of itself as a regional power. This was evidenced by India's role in Bangladesh's liberation and subsequent independence in 1971, its nuclear tests in 1974, and its incorporation of Sikkim into India. India's ties with Pakistan and Bangladesh were severely strained after the 1971 war and the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975,

respectively (Jain, 2005). Additionally, India was worried that other South Asian countries would use the South Asian Regional Association against it or that the regional forum would be heavily influenced by powers from outside the region. Until the 1980s, South Asian regional cooperation was hampered by a number of factors (Jain, 2005). Then, in 1980, a major breakthrough occurred in the area of establishing South Asian regional cooperation. Zia-ur Rahman, president of Bangladesh, had been working toward the formation of a regional organisation in South Asia (in future SAARC) since at least 1977, when he and Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai discussed the necessity of such an organisation (Jain, 2005). The proposal was finalised by the President of Bangladesh in 1979. In 1980, however, President Zia-ur Rahman made his last formal proposal (Jain, 2005). Several significant political events occurred in the late 1970s. In 1979, The Soviet Union's intervention and military invasion of Afghanistan brought the Cold War to the doorstep of a South Asian nation and quickly deteriorated the security situation in the region (Sharma, 2001). (Jain, 2005). Most South Asian countries were experiencing a balance of payments crisis, which was exacerbated by the oil crisis of 1979 and the growing policy of protectionism in developed countries. Given these circumstances, Bangladesh proposed the establishment of a regional organisation to provide South Asian leaders with a forum for addressing regional issues and a means of better resolving them collectively rather than individually (Jain, 2005). Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan were among the first to accept Bangladesh's proposal to form a regional organisation. However, both India and Pakistan were sceptical of the proposal and voiced concerns about it. In Pakistan's view, this would only benefit India's political and economic interests and help cement India's position as the region's dominant power (Jain, 2005). The situation for India was precarious. India was worried that other South Asian countries would use this proposed organisation as a means of uniting against or "ganging up" on India, and it was also concerned that the West might be behind the proposal. However, rejecting the proposal would have led to

accusations and criticism that India is being self-centered and is impeding genuine efforts to enhance cooperation and create institutions that would improve regional stability (Jain, 2005). (Sharma, 2001). Rejection would have made India a pariah in the region. That's why the Indian government got involved in SAARC's preparatory talks and consultations.

Colombo, Sri Lanka, hosted the first-ever foreign secretary-level summit in 1981. (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011). Foreign ministers from South Asia first met in August 1983 in New Delhi, where they adopted the Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) and launched the Integrated Program of Action (IPA), in which they agreed to cooperate in five areas: agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, health, and population activities (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011). (Jain, 2005). The declaration also included a provision requiring unanimous member approval and leaving bilateral and contentious issues out of it (Jain, 2005). In December 1985, at the First Summit in Dhaka, the Charter was adopted and signed by the Heads of State to officially establish the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Jain, 2005). India has hosted three of the 18 SAARC summits held to date: the 2nd SAARC summit in Bengaluru in November 1986, the 8th SAARC summit in New Delhi in May 1995, and the 14th SAARC summit in 2007 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). The most recent summit was held in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu. Most recently, Pakistan announced it was prepared to host the SAARC summit. SAARC now counts Afghanistan as its eighth member (PTI, 2021). SAARC member states now collaborate in eleven distinct fields, including academia, the arts, and more. Despite being one of the most important regional organisations, SAARC has been largely unsuccessful since it was established.

III. INDIAN POLICY TOWARDS SAARC

India has maintained a low, reserved profile within SAARC since the organization's inception. India had good reason to avoid sending hegemonic signals in the region. India has always been in a

catch-22 when it comes to regional cooperation: on the one hand, if India takes a bold and proactive approach to regional issues, its neighbours may interpret that as an attempt on India's part to dominate them and establish itself as a regional hegemon (Jain, 2005). In contrast, India's indifference to SAARC cooperation is interpreted as if it takes a cautious approach to taking initiatives (Jain, 2005). That's why India plays it safe whenever it interacts with other SAARC countries. Even though India had superior infrastructure and communication capabilities at the time (1987), it did not actively pursue the creation of the SAARC secretariat, which was eventually built in Kathmandu (Jain, 2005). When asked about SAARC's economic viability, Indian policymakers said they didn't think it would work (Muni & Jetly, 2008). Whenever questioned about its attitude toward SAARC, India has always insisted that it takes a constructive and positive stance (Jain, 2005). In the 1990s, India liberalised its economy and expanded its economic power. It began playing a more significant role in the area (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014). The Gujral Doctrine, named after Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, outlines five guiding principles for interactions between India and its neighbours. These principles emphasise India's willingness to accommodate its neighbours in good faith and without expecting anything in return. According to the first tenet, "India will not seek reciprocity with countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka," instead accommodating them in "good faith and trust" (Sibal, 2019). This policy grew out of the conviction that India's standing and prestige on the global stage depend on its relationships with its neighbours (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014). However, it should be noted that India began to withdraw from SAARC due to issues caused by Pakistan's unyielding stance on Kashmir, as well as Pakistan's and Bangladesh's desire to politicise any bilateral or regional issue (Muni & Jetly, 2008). This principle and spirit were carried forward by subsequent governments, most notably those of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014).

During the 12th SAARC Summit in 2004, India proposed several measures to bolster SAARC, such as the establishment of a regional food bank and a Poverty Alleviation Fund, with India's initial contribution of 100 million USD to the fund (Jain, 2005). The "Manmohan Singh Doctrine," formulated by then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, emphasised the establishment of more robust regional institutions to guarantee greater cooperation and connectivity. As the largest country in the region, India was ready in 2007, when it hosted the SAARC Summit, for its external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee to announce India's willingness to "accept asymmetrical responsibilities, including opening up her markets to her South Asian neighbours without insisting on reciprocity" (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014). India announced in the same year that it would open its markets to the world's least developed nations without expecting anything in return. Despite efforts, engagement between India and SAARC has remained on shaky and disappointing grounds for a variety of reasons, including a low rate of intraregional trade (with India being the least open country) and a general failure of SAARC to meet its goals. By the end of 2014, Narendra Modi had risen to the position of prime minister. The Modi government's Neighborhood First Policy reenergized India's approach to its immediate neighbourhood by prioritising the improvement of ties with and communication within neighbouring states. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) included support for regional organisations like SAARC in its 2014 platform (Seth, 2014). Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014 was dubbed a "mini SAARC summit" (Vohra, 2014) because he invited the heads of state of all SAARC members, including Pakistan.

During the state visit of the Nepalese Prime Minister to India in 2014, Modi described SAARC as a "vital instrument to add to the strength of each member nation and advance collective action for shared prosperity in the region." Sandhu and Singh Sindhu (2014) demonstrated this. PM Modi visited Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh all within his first 100 days in office (Sidhu & Godbole, 2015). The Kathmandu Declaration adopted at the 18th

SAARC Summit in 2014 stated its goal to speed up regional cooperation and development and acknowledged the need for "revitalising and reinvigorating SAARC" after three decades of formation (Sidhu & Godbole, 2015). Modi supported and pitched for this revitalization (Das). India announced a number of initiatives during the summit, including expanding its immediate medical visa to 3-5 year business visas and funding the establishment of the SAARC Regional Supra Reference Laboratory for Tuberculosis and HIV (PTI, 2014). Regional energy grid agreements were also signed by India. Despite regional political tensions between nations, India is trying to promote cooperation among SAARC countries through sub-regionalism, as evidenced by the Motor Vehicle Agreement signed by Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal in 2015. (Yhome & Maini, 2017) (Das). These measures raised hopes that SAARC could be revitalised, but in 2016, SAARC was dealt a major blow when India and three other member states boycotted and refused to attend the SAARC summit in Islamabad in response to the terror attacks on the Indian Army Camp in Uri (PTI, 2021). Combined with the rising threat of state-sponsored terrorism from Pakistan against India, this has stymied cooperation and effectively put SAARC out of commission (Haider, 2021). After initially focusing on ASEAN, India has shifted its attention to BIMSTEC in an effort to foster regional cooperation. From Modi's 2019 inauguration, where he invited BIMSTEC members to join him, we can see this shift in Modi's approach (Kaura & Rani, 2020). In 2019, S. Jaishankar said (with reference to Pakistan's membership in SAARC) that the organisation faces challenges beyond terrorism, including connectivity and trade issues, and that this shifts India's attention to BIMSTEC (Basu, 2019). In 2020, though, India once again took the lead in organising a global video conference. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states established the COVID Emergency Fund and met to discuss a coordinated response to the ongoing COVID pandemic in the South Asian region (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). India has recently declared that it will ship vaccines to

SAARC countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, etc. (PTI, 2021). India's efforts have been crucial in reviving SAARC cooperation, but there is still a long way to go before the organisation is truly effective and the full potential of its members is realised.

IV. RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND OTHER MAJOR SAARC MEMBERS

Understanding international and regional organisations and the cooperation among their members, as well as the success or failure of that cooperation, requires an appreciation of the dynamics between nations. Here we will examine India's bilateral ties with some of the other SAARC powerhouses, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

India – Pakistan Relationship

It was the year 1947. This year marked a turning point in India's past. After nearly two centuries of British rule, India gained its independence at midnight on 15 August 1947. Partition (a horrific and brutal colonial legacy) led to the separation of India and Pakistan on 14-15 August 1947, so independence was not without cost (2020). The "Two-Nation Theory" was the foundation for this. Relations between India and Pakistan have been fraught and tense ever since the two countries were founded. Pakistan has maintained an unwavering position that Kashmir is rightfully theirs and thus ought to be an integral part of Pakistan. The first Indo-Pakistani War broke out in 1947, not long after both countries were founded, when Pakistan invaded and occupied Jammu and Kashmir by sending in armed tribesmen (Regional Aspiration, 2020). The invading forces were repelled and defeated by the Indian armed forces. The United Nations was brought in to mediate, and on January 1, 1949, a ceasefire was declared. Because of this conflict, Pakistan occupied Kashmir was born. Despite their hostile relationship, India and Pakistan signed the Indus Water treaty in 1960 (India's External Relations, 2019). War broke out between India and Pakistan twice more, in 1965 and 1971; the latter conflict eventually freed Bangladesh. In 1998, India and Pakistan both

conducted nuclear tests, making them both nuclear-capable neighbours. While the Indian Army was proclaiming victory in 1999, the Pakistani military was saying that they had won (Roychowdhury, 2016).

India- Bangladesh Relationship

After the war between India and Pakistan in 1971, East Pakistan — now called Bangladesh — gained its independence. The Indian government was quick to recognise Bangladesh's independence. India's longest and fifth-longest boundary is with Bangladesh, at a combined length of 4096.7 kilometres (CHAUDHURY, 2021). The relationship between India and Bangladesh, while generally positive, has not been without its share of difficulties. Assassins shot and killed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The damage to relations between India and Bangladesh was significant. Since his death, Bangladesh has been ruled by a military junta. The country returned to a democratic government in 1991. The relationship between India and Bangladesh has been steadily improving since 2009, when Sheikh Hasina took office in Bangladesh (Habib, 2021). This improvement began in 1996 and was halted briefly in 2001, when Begum-Khaleda Zia was in power in Bangladesh. As of 1996, the Ganga Waters Treaty had been ratified (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). The first bus line connecting Kolkata and Dhaka was established in 1999. (Ramachandran, 2021). The train line between Kolkata and Dhaka was repaired in 2008. (Ramachandran, 2021). In 2015, India and Bangladesh exchanged the instruments of ratification of the historic Land Boundary Agreement, under which India and Bangladesh agreed to return 111 enclaves (from India to Bangladesh) and 74 enclaves (from Bangladesh to India) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017; Kaura & Rani, 2020); India also extended a \$2 billion line of credit to Bangladesh in the same year (Das). Growth in bilateral trade is also a positive sign. India's largest trading partner in South Asia is Bangladesh, and Indian exports to Bangladesh totaled \$8.2 billion in 2019–20. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

India-Nepal Relationship

India and Nepal's special, ancient ties date back millennia. Due to the historic Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed between India and Nepal in 1950, citizens of both countries are now free to travel back and forth across the border without a passport or visa, as well as to own property, work, conduct businesses, and reside in either country without restriction (2019). (Singh S.G., 2020). Since taking office in 2014, Prime Minister Modi has made no less than six trips to Nepal, a reflection of the country's strategic importance to India's NeighborFirst Policy (Jha, 2021). India provided scholarships to roughly 3,000 Nepalese students studying in India and Nepal in 2015 as part of its 'Bharat Nepal MaitriShikshanKaryakram' (Das) programme, and the country also conducted a massive rescue operation and provided substantial financial aid to Nepal in the wake of the country's 2015 earthquakes (Kaura&Rani, 2020).

The BBIN Agreement includes Nepal in addition to India. In 2021, India sent 1 million doses of the Covishield Vaccine to Nepal as a goodwill gesture during the COVIDpandemic (Jha, 2021). Nepal's most important trading partner is India, so Indian currency is widely accepted there. In addition to commerce, science and technology, electricity generation, etc., India and Nepal work together in a number of other areas. However, despite these bright spots, the Indo-Nepalese relationship has grown noticeably colder over time. The Madhesi people of Nepal caused a political crisis in 2015 by protesting the adoption of a new constitution (Das). The Madhesi people of the terai region (Das) of the country were given fewer protections under the new constitution (Kaura& Rani, 2020). Madhesis have strong ties to the people of Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring Bihar. Even in UNHCR, India voiced concern over political instability or progress, incidents of violence and discrimination in Nepal (Das), and India backed the idea that the constitution should guarantee their interests and rights. The protesters then blocked all entry and exit points from India and Nepal, causing a shortage of food, medicine, and other necessities that

exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation (Das).

India has strongly denied Nepal's accusations that it has imposed a "unofficial blockade," saying that the blockade is not on their side but on Nepal's (Das). As a result, the relationship was severely harmed. Conflicts arose in 2020 when Nepal published maps claiming the Indian regions of Lipulekh, Kalapani, etc. as its own territory (Jha, 2021). Other issues, such as Nepal harbouring anti-Indian elements, and negative Nepalese people, economic issues caused by demonetisation, etc (2019), are complicated by the rise of Chinese influence and growing closeness of Nepal and China (2020). The current state of Indo-Nepalese relations is fragile and needs to be strengthened if the two countries are to work together more effectively. India's relations with other SAARC members like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan are better and warmer than they are with the rest of the world, but the rise of Chinese influence and other differences have made bilateral relations and cooperation more complicated and trickier to navigate.

V. ECONOMICS AND OTHER MAJOR AREAS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND SAARC

India's contributions to SAARC have been substantial, helping to advance the organization's goals of fostering regional cooperation in economics, culture, education, and other areas. With the goal of fostering economic cooperation through tariff concessions, the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement was put into effect in 1995. As early as 1995, at the 8th SAARC Summit in New Delhi, the concept of a free trade agreement between South Asian countries was discussed. The South Asian Free Trade Area Agreement (SAFTA) was signed in 2004 at the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad (Jain, 2005) with the goal of establishing South Asia Economic Union through SAFTA by lowering trade barriers and increasing cooperation between member states (Financial Express, 2005). The year 2006 marked its official launch after being planned for several years as a replacement for

SAPTA. Over a ten-year period, the SAFTA aimed to eliminate tariffs on international trade entirely, decreasing them from 5% to zero.

Each country is free to keep its own list of restricted items. India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka must maintain customs tariffs below 5% by 2013 (Trigunayat, 2017) and LDCs must do so by 2016. Additionally, within three years of signing SAFTA, member states were obligated to form a Committee of Experts to recognise a sensitive list of products and the like (Jain, 2005). 5.5% of its total global trade comes from India and the rest of South Asia (Trigunayat, 2017). SAFTA has not been very successful, ineffective, or seen much growth over the years (BASU, 2020). (Singh R. K., 2019). Liberalization, free trade, and investments in the service sector were made mandatory with the 2012 implementation of SATIS (SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services). India has taken a measured and gradual approach to lowering tariffs, and the country is prepared for the swift implementation of SATIS (Trigunayat, 2017). Both voluntary and assessed contributions from India totaling \$89 million have helped bolster the SAARC Development Fund's total of \$100 million. Trigunayat (2017) India and the SAARC nations work together on cultural issues as well.

According to the World Trade Centre in Mumbai, 2016 is the SAARC Year of Cultural Heritage. India has helped fund several cultural groups working toward SAARC regional cooperation by providing them with financial support. There is currently unfinished work at the SAARC Museum of Textile and Handicrafts and Training Centre in New Delhi. The 12th South Asian Games were held in Guwahati and Shillong in 2016, bringing people together through athletic competition. Trigunayat (2017) India and SAARC member states have collaborated in the medical field. India has made it simpler for SAARC citizens to obtain medical visas and has been running a successful tele medical service in Afghanistan for some time now (Trigunayat, 2017).

VI. ISSUES AND CONCERNS WITH SAARC

While the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a significant regional organisation of South Asia, it has been ineffective and failed in fostering cooperation and furthermore it has failed in fulfilling its objective since its inception in 1985. Unfortunately, SAARC has not been able to carry out its many plans and programmes with the same degree of success. In the thirty years since its inception in 1985, SAARC has held eighteen summits. However, the SAARC has faced many challenges during its existence, and it has not been successful in fostering cooperation or accomplishing its goals. Unfortunately, SAARC has also struggled to effectively implement a number of separate programmes and initiatives. There have been 18 summits of the SAAR since 1985, a span of 30 years. However, throughout its existence, the SAARC has faced a number of challenges. Over the course of the organization's three decades, SAARC summits have been either postponed (11 times, according to Bhattacharjee 2018) or cancelled altogether. One of the world's least integrated regions today is South Asia (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014).

The effectiveness and forward momentum of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement, which came into force in 2006, have both stalled. Whereas intra-regional trade accounts for roughly 65% of EU total trade, 51% of NAFTA total trade, and 25% of ASEAN total trade, it accounts for only 5% of SAFTA area total trade despite logistical advantages and regional potential (Singh R. K., 2019). Terrorism in the region has not been effectively addressed by the SAARC's Regional Conventional on Suppression of Terrorism (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014). Even though many SAARC countries face political instability, military coups, pervasive corruption, and abuse of power, it is deeply discouraging to see so few of them commit to the goals of the SAARC Charter for Democracy (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014). In addition, SAARC has failed in the most fundamental way that a regional organisation can succeed: ensuring that its members are at peace with one another (Sandhu & Singh Sindhu, 2014).

VII. CONCLUSION

As a result of its many failures and difficulties over the years, SAARC has largely ceased functioning as an organisation in recent years. There has been a shift in membership priorities amongst BIMSTEC's (Bay of Bengal Multi Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation) member states, with India among them. SAARC is a regional platform where it can cooperate collectively on various common issues and regional stability, despite failure and challenges. SAARC is especially important for India for a number of reasons. Because of its narrow focus on the Bay of Bengal region, BIMSTEC is not a suitable replacement for the South Asian countries because it cannot simultaneously engage all of them (Ranjan, 2020). In addition, the rise of China as one of the significant powers in the 21st century is defining feature of this era. As part of its global expansion policy, China has taken an aggressive stance in the region (Ranjan, 2020). China's political and economic sway over South Asian nations like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, etc. is expanding. Moreover, China has been lobbying for permanent membership of SAARC, which would be detrimental to Indian interests and would reduce India's sway within SAARC if it were to be granted (Madan, 2014). By fostering regional cooperation and economic integration, SAARC gives India a platform to assert its regional leadership in the face of growing Chinese influence. Even though the United States, Japan, and other observer states have been relatively inactive in SAARC organisation over the years, they still have a significant indirect impact on the organisation through their economic and strategic agreements. It is important to increase the responsibility given to observer states like the United States and Japan.

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