

## SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures, and Compulsion for Cooperation



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**Abstract** *This study explains the concept of Association and procedure of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) cooperation in the South Asian region and tries to find a solution as to why India and Pakistan are initially unwilling to join the regional cooperation, and when and how regional cooperation is possible. A qualitative research method is used to evaluate the success and failure of SAARC. Basically, the idea of SAARC is to promote peace, harmony and economic growth through the cooperation of South Asian states, by sharing the available resources and to build trust among parties and also by facilitating collaboration and regular contact between political leaders. The tensions between the two rivalries have caused great damage to SAARC cooperation. The lingering Kashmir issue also remained a great hurdle in the process of progress and cooperation. Indian hegemonic design, mistrust and bad attitude towards the smaller states of South Asia hamper all the efforts for greater regional integration.*

## SAARC Origins and Objectives

The Idea of SAARC came into existence in 1980 at the initiation of former Bangladesh President Zia-ur-Rahman, highlighted to cater to many problems that are facing the South Asian countries. He finally published a document on "Regional Cooperation in South Asia" focusing on the eleven possible areas for regional cooperation (Javid,2013).

In April 1981, when the first meeting took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka laid the groundwork for a further in-depth discussion by drawing up an action plan for regional cooperation. "A series of meetings held in Khatmandu (November 1981), Islamabad (August 1982), Dhaka (March 1983) and Delhi (July 1983) proved to be a solid basis for formulating the conceptual framework for regional cooperation"(Das, 1992).

The region of South Asia consists of eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and India. The South Asian countries are endowed with enormous "natural resources and geographic diversity", serving South Asia with its enormous "potential for prosperity". Problems inside and outside South Asia could jeopardize the security of the entire region. It is important that these interconnected states work systematically to increase risks to stability and order in the region. The "South Asian Association of regional cooperation" (SAARC) was established for the regional, political and economic relations of South Asian states with the objectives of regional peace, economic prosperity, and social empowerment for the people. Almost, all member states share a common border with India. The countries of the region are economically, culturally, and sociologically linked because the British ruled the region for almost 200 years. The logic of forming SAARC was to create "a regional community for common interest, value, actions and inter-governmental cooperation" (Lamichhane, 2016).

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The basic objective is to support the economic, social and cultural change of the South Asian states through cooperation in positively valued areas. This shows why groups of people from South Asia join territorially, to collaborate on outcomes on issues in one entity of collaboration, similar to other regional organizations in the world. SAARC has also set up an "institutional framework" at various regular summits to discuss the modalities and opportunities for cooperation between its members. To date, there have been more than a dozen summit meetings that have rigorously pursued the fundamental goals. They have promoted regional cooperation through mutual support and economic, social, cultural and scientific cooperation. However, in order to improve SAARC's effectiveness, efforts must be made at all levels to address various bilateral and trilateral issues that delay regional cooperation processes in a number of areas (Singh, 2016).

### **Importance of SAARC**

Pakistan dominated the other South Asian states in terms of strategic location due to its bridging location. Bangladesh's political-strategic location is also very important for China to approach the Bay of Bengal though Nepal and Bhutan which are both rich in terms of energy resources and very important to India. India, itself is dominating and has a central location within the region, and important in terms of a stable economy and nuclear power. "The 21<sup>st</sup> century belongs to Asia and, in the next two decades, South Asia and China can together reshape history with half the world's population residing here" (Alam, 2006). Big power interests have been very prominent towards the south Asian region especially during the cold war, war on terror and to encounter China because it is an emerging economic giant (Javaid, 2013).

"Seven countries of South Asia and recently added Afghanistan has before it the proposal to include the People Republic of China, sit at the crossroads of the concentration of Northeast Asia's industrial, technological and military power, the Indian sub-continent, its population region, and the Middle East, Australia and Southeast Pacific's oil reserves. The strategic location of these countries, termed South Asia, sees a high percentage of the commerce and oil shipments representing Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Australia traverse the sea-lanes and straits of this region. In addition, this locale represents an important strategic location for the United States in moving its forces to the Indian Ocean and Pakistan Gulf from the Western Pacific" (Qadri, 2008).

### **SAARC Regional Centres**

"Regional Centres covering Agriculture, Tuberculosis, Documentation, Meteorological Research, and Human Resource Development have been established in different SAARC capitals: SAIC (Dhaka, 1998) STC (Katmandu, 1992) SDC (New Delhi, 1994) SMRC (Dhaka, 1995) SHRDC (Islamabad, 1999) SCC (Kandy, 2004) SCZMC (Malé, 2004) and SIC (Katmandu, 2004). In addition, three new regional centers covering Culture, Coastal Zones Management, and Information are being established" (Iqbal, 2006).

### **Theoretical framework**

India is the local hegemon in this region or the core state in the words of Barry Buzan. India has used its power to forward its hegemonic designs often at the expense of the SAARC. The recent postponement of the Islamabad SAARC conference through Indian machinations is an example of how SAARC has paid the price for Indian ambitions (Falak, 2017).

Indian hegemonic attitudes upset all the efforts to achieve economic and social growth in the region and, additionally, that region has a grave security crisis. South Asia is underdeveloped and is facing numerous challenges and threats except for India. Neither the members nor the organization looks eager to develop the socio-economic status of the South Asian region. These are the weaknesses due to which SAARC is unable to find out the actual solutions to the major problems (Ifikhar, 2014).

This study includes important questions to explain the success as well as failures of SAARC. Its success is not enough for planning, forming and creating the largest regional organizations from a public point of

view. The error indicates that industry policy, permitting system, agency, agreement, trade, and policy cannot be created.

### **Institutional Framework**

Similar to other bodies, SAARC has created an "institutional framework" that regularly holds multi-level summits and has established a large number of institutions and states to discuss the options and possibilities regarding cooperation amongst its members. So, SAARC would support the South Asian identity and encourage the progress of south Asia (Singh, 2016).

Therefore, if India and Pakistan remain unsettled to solve the issues and tensions, the regional process of cooperation in South Asia will remain inconsequential and unreliable, making only a "stop-and-go" design for the development of SAARC imaginable (Dash, 2008).

Therefore, South Asia finds itself in a position where it has too few established options of multilateral cooperation and too many emerging ones. The established frameworks – SAARC and SAFTA risk running aground given local animosities (notably between India and Pakistan) and a lack of interest on the part of outsiders. Conversely, new initiatives offer opportunities but also bring with them the uncertainty that may nourish political anxiety and inflame the security dilemma whereby confrontation prevails over cooperation (Rynning, 2017).

### **Regionalism**

The experience in South Asia, therefore, has been quite unfortunate in this regard. "Regionalism in the shape of the SAARC was set in motion over three decades ago but the progress towards regional cooperation, economic integration, and creation of the security community in South Asia has been mostly paralyzed. Regionalism in South Asia, however, has faced several prominent challenges; the establishment of SAARC in 1985 regionalism does not have the total support of the elites from some of the states. Uniting the region's elites to back regionalism is, therefore, the first political challenge that needs to be addressed" (Pattanaik, 2011).

"Regionalism further its strategic, geopolitical and foreign policy dimensions have been a major plank of development cooperation and integration in various parts of the world. There are sufficient examples of regional organizations that have transformed the conventional outlook and aspirations into more open, dynamic and wider systems and practices of peaceful coexistence collective responsibility and regional development. There are instances where bilateral issues have been effectively dealt with by the larger concept of win a win situation generated by regionalism and multilateralism. The new regionalism also purposes the growth of a regional civil society opting for a regional solution to local, national and regional problems. The implications of this or that not only economic but also social and cultural network are developing more quickly than the formal political corporation the regional level"(Rizal, 2012)

Originally SAARC worked in areas such as population, health, climatology, culture, telecommunications, and sports. The December 1988 Islamabad Summit saw significant progress in this area. He underlined the fundamental requirement for "real and result-oriented activities" in the SAARC Agreement to involve the trade sector. At their sixth summit in Colombo in December 1991, leaders also pledged to liberalize trade through a regular process in a region by sharing the facilities of fair trade.

### **SAARC Achievements**

#### **SAFTA**

SAARC introduced SAFTA to boost trade between the Member States and in December 1995, emphasizing that there was a need to understand the "South Asian Free Zone Exchange" (SAFTA). The contract was signed at the 12<sup>th</sup> Summit which was held in Islamabad. In December 2005, the government

of India approved SAFTA and flagged it for its official launch on 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 2006, when it was hoped that all participating countries would lower interest rates by the 2016 deadline.

### **South Asian Identity**

The most important achievements of SAARC are to bring the members of the states close and think about regional issues and identity. That is based on the positive aspect of the individual state which should be attractive for the people of the SAARC countries to emulate. It is important not to think as a South Asian but feel proud of a South Asian identity within the region. There is also the serious need to cooperate and contact among the people, to improve cultural identities and break the barriers among the people of South Asia (Pattanaik, 2011).

### **The SAARC Food Bank**

"The SAARC Food Bank", was recognized originally to facilitate as an emergency source for facing a crisis in shortage or a natural disaster, floods, earthquakes, and such other issues. In the 14<sup>th</sup> summit at Islamabad, signed the channel to accept a mutual attitude to unite "food security" for the people of South Asia and then the formal development and procedure for strategies must plan ahead to provide a functional character (SAARC Summit, 2011).

### **SAARC Development Fund**

SAARC Development Fund was recognized by the eight SAARC Members in 2010. SDF was objective "to promote the welfare for the people of the South Asian region; to improve their quality of life, economic growth, social progress and poverty". It is also one of the achievements of the Regional Association for the safety, progress and prosperity for the people of South Asia.

### **South Asian University**

The South Asian University is another achievement by the members' state. It is an international university established in 2010 by the SAARC desk. At this time University is offering postgraduate and doctoral programs in several disciplines.

"While SAARC may constantly be engaged in resolving the political and economic dilemmas amongst its members with limited success, optimists view the cooperation on education as one of the few achievements of SAARC. It may also be a catalyst for the regional integration process. The university aims to create a center of excellence and produce leaders who identify themselves as citizens of the region with a common vision of success for both their home country and the neighbors" (Dogra, 2010).

### **SAARC Arbitration Council**

The arbitration council is an achievement of SAARC to provide a legal forum for the South Asian nations for solving conflicts. "SAARC Arbitration Council, Islamabad, is one of the Specialized Bodies of South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation; comprising the eight-member States SAARC arbitration council is an inter-governmental body authorized to provide a legal framework or forum within the region for fair and effective settlement of industrial, commercial, trade, investment banking, such their other issues, and disputes, as may be referred to it by the member states and their people" (SAARC Summit, 2011).

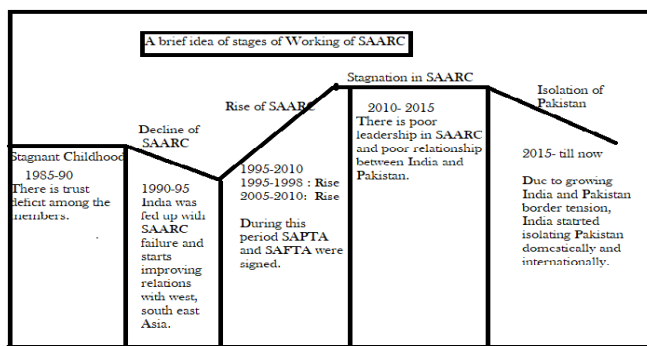
### **South Asian Regional Standards Organization**

The Establishment of SARSO entered with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011 after approval by all SAARC countries. Through the creation of the (SARSO) in 2011, "a particular body to deal with trade-related standards, here is major potential for greater coordination of such standards to support trade growth in South Asia and universally for SAARC countries. By reviewing other relevant standardization organisations,

their methods and achievements, SARSO can adopt the tools and necessary approaches to achieve its goals and those of SAARC. The SARSO is positioned to create strong and effective structures for the harmonization of trade standards to facilitate economic growth and development in South Asia” (Cote, 2016).

### People to People Contact

“The South Asian region could become a conflict-free area if the members of the states and people of south Asian region build maximum acceptance of the concerns which are vital for the progress. A greater degree of assistance and cooperation is compulsory for the achievements and developments and security of South Asia. It greatly depends upon the South Asian outlook and behavior of SAARC members and the policies outlined to extend the level of assistance in the region. There is a need



Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=saarc&source>

of the hour to make some serious efforts to create close understanding between the people of South Asia and a sense of brotherhood which is important for the conservation of peace and harmony of the region” (Ahmar, 1982).

### Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

SAARC has enabled CBMs to be presented at the highest level and also has succeeded in reducing the conflicts. Despite the various obstacles created by the main regional players and the economic structure, SAARC has not only continued but had even gradually expanded its reach, particularly in trade (Singh, 2016).

### Reasons for failure

Regional co-operation all over the world has promoted development, peace, and harmony. The EU and the ASEAN and the North American Free Trade Agreement are good examples of a high level of regional cooperation and interdependence as a result of regional co-operation. People in these regions have witnessed a rapid increase in their living standards and the protection of their civil liberties. In comparison, South Asia has a unique distinction of having very poor levels of regional co-operation. The regional organization, SAARC has remained highly unsuccessful in realizing development and welfare objectives (Upreti, & Shashi, 2012).

Despite the above-mentioned achievements, SAARC sometimes uses looser planning to discuss issues and problems. Bilateral summits have also been used for this purpose (Sridharan, 2008).

In spite of the historical ties in regard to the social, economic and cultural fields the eight South Asian countries of the SAARC have not formed an economic grouping. Of course, there are many factors responsible for this delay and cooperation in this region, so the pace of progress in realizing cooperation in this region has been slow due to these factors since the formation of SAARC (Das, 1992). In spite of having close geographical, cultural and historical similarity, the organization has failed to reach the desired destination for certain causes.

The problem is that the policies of the regional states have not shifted to take advantage of the ideas developed by these exchanges or to reduce the suspicions that are so intense with each of the states. One

can only hope that the time will come when the work of such exchanges may bear fruit. Unfortunately, that time has not yet shown itself (Rynning, 2017).

In the wake of conflicts in South Asia, regional power politics has been holding SAARC back from achieving its full progress. The real problem in this regard is considered the Charter of SAARC that ignores the discussion of political and other main issues. Understanding the other regional organizations without the resolution of political issues, the real improvement would stay wishful thinking. A common observation has appeared amongst the SAARC members that the charter of SAARC should be developed so that resolution of political issues could be thinkable which ultimately would cover the way for South Asian member states to achieve their goals under SAARC.

### **Languishing for want of Political Will**

With political tensions and clashes nearby “the South Asian countries pose a query of insecurity and challenge to the creation of South Asian Union at balance with European Union that would permit free movement of South Asian people; common currency economic policies which finally will sow the seeds of harmony/peace. In order to attain the major objectives, the SAARC would have to progress into a complete regional entity that can promote peace in the region. The understanding of durable peace, harmony and the future of economic integration through SAARC association depend upon the capability and interest of South Asian leaders to resolve domestic as well as long-standing issues through peaceful negotiations” (Iqbal, 2006).

### **Kashmir Dispute**

The territorial disputes over Kashmir remain the most divisive issue in the sub-continent and a major source of bitterness because both the states have already fought more than three wars in 1948, 1965, and 1999 over the Kashmir issue. The roots of the problem in Kashmir can be traced to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Subsequently, both India and Pakistan claimed to speak on behalf of the people of Kashmir, but neither has been prepared to discuss the demand of many Kashmiris for independence. India maintains that Kashmir is an undisputed part of its territory, Pakistan that the accession to India and subsequent ratification by the Jammu and Kashmir State Assembly had no firm basis in law and was never accepted by the United Nations. Moreover, many major powers—notably Great Britain, the United States, and China—agree that Kashmir is disputed. According to Pakistani officials, Kashmir remains the unfinished business of the 1947 partition, and India’s control of the Muslim majority areas in J&K went against the overall logic of the partition. Pakistan believes that a peaceful solution can be found only if India yields on these points instead of refusing to accept the reality of Pakistan and its hegemonic aspirations (Chari, Cheema, & Cohen, 2009).

“Frozen conflicts which, also persist on our borders, threaten regional security and stability. They destroy human lives and social and physical infrastructures; they threaten minorities, fundamental freedom, and human rights. Conflicts can lead to extremism, terrorism and state failure. It provides opportunities for organized crime” (Kumar, 2005).

### **Dealing with Terrorism**

The growth of progress of SAARC is in very sluggish mode. So, the present condition has left SAARC unable to talk about several hot concerns such as transportation trade, and management of adversity, transfer of energy, terrorism and security in the South Asian region (Lamichhane, 2016).

“The forum also urged them to control trans-border movements of terrorists by sharing information. A number of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms have been working to increase the cooperation of the international community to counterterrorism. But the SAARC is still far away from evolving a common counter-terrorism strategy and all members are equally responsible for it. It is imperative that members keep aside their political differences for a common cause as delay will only embolden the terrorist

organizations. Despite adopting and formulating a number of strategies and mechanisms on bilateral/multilateral levels, SAARC Summit, the highest authority of the forum, has not been able to evolve a common and comprehensive approach to counterterrorism. The SAARC should evolve much more comprehensive and region-specific policy and all the conventions adopted against terrorism must be honored” (Jabeen & Choudhry, 2013).

### **Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia**

SAARC, as a regional cooperation proposal from Bangladesh, could not give ultimate satisfaction to Pakistan. She was reluctant to join SAARC and she was not ready to provide India with another hegemonic platform. They were also anxious that the more interaction and cooperation might dim their political perspective of Kashmir. Later, Pakistan accepted SAARC on the basis of the equal and sovereign share of every member state (Javaid, 2013).

It is important for Indian leaders to realize that it is much easier to win the trust of regional neighbors and remove their anxiety about a rising India through the projection of soft power rather than hard power. The idea of soft power, as argued by Joseph Nye 2005, is that countries achieve their objectives by persuading rather than force. While the tools of hard power are military and economic, the tools of soft power are cultural and ideological. Soft power rises from the appeal of a country's cultural, political and ideological policies. A country's soft power is enhanced when its images are seen as positive, and its strategies are considered as real in the eyes of others. India's negative image among its neighbors, as found in this study, requires to be addressed urgently by Indian leaders if they are serious to maintain their leadership in the region.

### **India Pakistan Relations**

The partition that accompanied the end of the British Raj in 1947 created two newly independent states that today account for almost 1.3 billion people, about one-fifth of all mankind. But India and Pakistan spent the next quarter-century in a more or less permanent crisis that has escalated into three major wars—in 1947, 1965, and 1971. When fighting erupted again near the border town of Kargil in the Himalayas in 1999 since both countries had experienced nuclear weapons (Chari, Cheema, & Cohen, 2009).

“Once again they were at the brink of war in 2001-02. This time military confrontation was due to the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. India blamed Pakistan for this attack. Recently another terrorist attack was witnessed in Mumbai in November 2008. There have been several other instances of terrorist attacks in India over the last decade, which have distorted the relations and brought them to a point of suspending all types of diplomatic ties. India blames Pakistan for all such activities and in return, the same practice is used by Pakistani intelligence agencies” (Jabeen, & Choudhry, 2013).

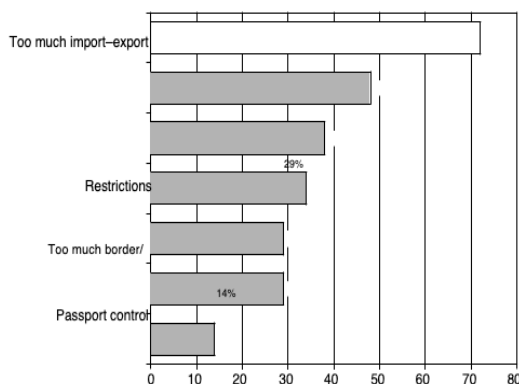
### **Role of Major Powers**

South Asian members would sooner or later realize the importance of regional cooperation. It is expected that if India and Pakistan are successful in resolving their issues and disputes peacefully and the superpowers are kept away from being directly involved in South Asian affairs then the chances for establishing a basis of regional cooperation and coordination would be bright. In short, South Asian States should realize that their survival and prosperity depend upon mutual cooperation rather than conflicts which are also essential for the preservation of regional peace and security. The SAARC formula, which developed after a prolonged discussion among the political leaders of South Asia, was to avoid security problems, leaving these problems to national action and bilateral or multilateral cooperation through other channels. The objectives of SAARC were set to enhance economic and other forms of non-military cooperation among South Asian countries. It was thought that increased cooperation in the economic area (low politics) and other soft areas would eventually lead to stability, development, and peace in the region. Given the reality of security and economic interdependence in South Asia and the prevailing security complex in which both India and Pakistan develop

their security strategies, the idea of cooperative security offers a realistic framework for Indian and Pakistani leaders to address the issues of conventional military and nuclear conflict management in the region (Dash, 2008).

### Water dispute

Besides the Kashmir problem, several other problems also escalated tension in south Asia. “The conflict between India and Pakistan over the distribution of water and the division of assets also created a rivalry between the South Asian states”(Ahmar, 1982). South Asian water problems may become a source of future intra and inter-state conflict unless an effective and supportive mechanism is developed soon. In fact, there is an imperative need for the South Asian region to introduce alternative ideas on co-operative transboundary water management to deal with the pending challenges (Gulf News, 2017).



### Compulsion to Cooperate

No region in recent times has been so badly affected by terrorism in South Asia. Energy and resources have had to be diverted from soft sectors to the detriment of countries' development. Achieving South Asian unity of ideas on regional cooperation and security policy would mean a fundamental break with an unfortunate past. The task is difficult, daunting and likely to be time-consuming. But if the region succeeds in overcoming its internal divisions to do so, it will almost certainly become a more thriving area, a zone of peace rather than violent conflict, and more influential on the global stage. A more united and integrated South Asia will in turn affect changes in the world's geopolitical landscape in ways that are still unknown but certainly positive for the south Asian people and the world community (Pattanaik, 2011).

### Need for Cooperation

There is no doubt about the facts and the formulation of SAARC which was a much-desired step to improve the cooperation. The common situations, global atmosphere, topography of the area, the past and culture and Human resources for accomplishing better expectations for everyday comforts for many individuals who otherwise were condemned to continuous poverty and misery.

“But in the effort to set up such an organization and demarcate its area of activity, some structural gaps were left, which in spite of the passage of some 18 years, have refused to be bridged thus keeping the organization unresponsive to the growing challenges. At the time of initiation of the SAARC, the thought in the minds of its founding fathers might well have been to bring all countries to the negotiation table, hoping that structural flaws would be overcome once the member states interacting. However, the exclusion of bilateral and contentious issues from the charter of the SAARC has been one of the major factors inhibiting the growth of the organization”(Qadri, 2008).



## Future of SAARC

The future of SAARC is also at stake for the same reason because of the Indian attitude of treating other countries of the region according to her own designs. The writings of Indian newspapers are a clear picture of Indian designs in South Asia. Kuldip Nayar expresses in *Indian Express* that the interests of advanced countries in India are naturally much more, comparatively, due to her diverse capacities. Now, it was India's liability to be proclaiming general development and prosperity in the region and protector of their interests on an international level. But unfortunately, her size has proved to be the cause of fear and anxiety for the neighboring countries instead of being beneficial. The neighboring countries have always been claiming that India, because of being older, terrifies and tries to take undue advantage. That is why there is an anti-India tendency in all the neighboring countries. Unpleasantness with Pakistan is a historical as well as a psychological problem. Theoretical differences between the two countries are too deep to fill up, but casual relations can be maintained. The thinking about each other is hostile. But this (situation) is not limited to Pakistan only; there are feelings against India in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. They have also the same complaints against India that her land has been used for activities against them and there are unsolved political issues related to them also. The future of SAARC is in danger due to their mutual tension

## Policies and Recommendation

All the members need to focus on growth and all-round development as the highest priority, and to meet this challenge they need stability and cooperative security system. After years of failed negotiations and through tough taking both sides would have to be serious to resolve their differences and simultaneously carry forward the process of peace and economic development and cooperation with all earnestness. For this a proper climate of trust and give and take has to be created to come to a possible solution of the complex issues. The painful fact is that after a very promising initiate and many positive steps in the initial years, the SAARC process has seemed to have come to a virtual standstill. The hopelessness of the business community and the political differences have laid down a major hurdle in the field of trading cooperation. It is crucial for the development of the region to ignore our political differences; when economic advantages become obvious political support will be ensured.

## Conclusion

After the founding of SAARC nearly 35 years ago, members of the South Asian Region have been able to maximize the integration progression. Finally, it can be stated that SAARC, although very important, was deterred from its effectiveness and performance by several internal problems. It is important for the region to strengthen the organization. Regardless of SAARC's weaknesses, this is the only platform where South Asian leaders gather to talk over local problems with 1.6 billion residents. SAARC leaders must work together in South Asia, which has developed peacefully and prosperously. However, it is important to note that sometimes a country does not want to cooperate because of national pride, lack of trust, political tension and unjustified distribution of costs and benefits. Regional cooperation agreements can help to build trust among parties by facilitating collaboration and frequent contact between political leaders. It is necessary to understand domestic institutional structures, government capacity, domestic support, and preferences of political and societal actors toward regional cooperation. Examining the record of achievements and failure of SAARC in the past three decades, one can argue that SAARC's rhetoric has generally outdistanced its performance. SAARC has achieved few concrete results in the areas of trade, security, and economic welfare.

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