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NAVIGATING REGIONAL DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE IN SOCIO-POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS OF SOUTH ASIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SAARC

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Abstract

South Asia is one of the most socially diverse, politically disputed, economically imbalanced and strategically important parts of the world. Historical, cultural, economic, ecological, and civilizational connections unite the eight states of the region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) but the states are quite different in terms of political systems, national identities, economic structures, strategic orientations, security perceptions, and state capabilities. These contradictions have greatly influenced the path of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which was formed in 1985 to facilitate the welfare of the region, economic growth, social progress, cultural growth, collective self-reliance and cooperation with each other. Though the SAARC has established an institutional structure of regional dialogue and cooperation, the ability to convert the regional interdependence into collective action is limited due to interstate rivalry, India-Pakistan tensions, power asymmetry, sovereignty issues, domestic political instability, poor institutionalization, insufficient connectivity, and poor implementation of regional agreements. This paper will discuss the impact of regional diversity on the resilience and performance of SAARC and whether diversity can be viewed as more of a challenge or as a resource to differentiated regional cooperation. The study uses qualitative comparative analysis and process tracing of key regions of cooperation in SAARC based on neorealist, neoliberal institutionalist, constructivist, and resilience-oriented approaches to regionalism. It contends that the major issue is not the diversity but the fact that there is no institutional mechanism that can handle diversity. The paper suggests a more flexible and multi-layered concept of regionalism, which is founded on issue-specific cooperation, variable geometry, subregional initiatives, functional integration, regional public goods and enhanced implementation mechanisms. Instead of trying to integrate prematurely politically, SAARC can re-establish itself by focusing on non-controversial issues, such as climate resilience, disaster management, public health, energy, food security, digital connectivity, trade facilitation, education, and human security, where regional interdependence generates incentives to cooperate. The paper has concluded that the future of SAARC is not so much in the removal of geopolitical differences but in the establishment of institutions

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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

that can help shield functional cooperation against political wrangles.

1. Introduction

South Asia is a paradox in the present international relations. It is both one of the most populated regions in the world, one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world and one of the least integrated regional spaces in the world. The South Asian countries have a long history and cultural relationship, share rivers and ecological systems, rely on interconnected transportation systems, face similar environmental and public-health issues, and have great potential of intraregional trade. However, the interdependencies have often not been the basis of effective regional institutions due to political relations. World Bank estimates that intraregional trade in South Asia is still just about 5 percent of the total trade, versus about 25 percent in ASEAN, and actual regional trade is still significantly lower than its potential (World Bank, 2026). It is on this basis of mutual interests and political disintegration that the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka officially formed the organization on 8 December 1985, and in 2007, Afghanistan became the eighth state to join the organization (SAARC Secretariat, 2020). According to the SAARC Charter, the welfare, economic growth, social progress, cultural development, collective self-reliance, mutual trust, and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific spheres are the main goals (SAARC, 1985).

The institutional structure of SAARC also has in it mechanisms that inhibit its political performance. They make decisions on the basis of unanimity, and bilateral and controversial matters are not a part of formal discussions (SAARC Secretariat, 2020). This principle was to safeguard sovereignty and ensure the organization was not a place of interstate conflicts. Nevertheless, it has also resulted in a structural paradox: the organization leaves out exactly those political conflicts that determine the regional security environment and relies on the agreement between the states whose relations are frequently determined by these conflicts. The main thesis of this paper is that the regional diversity cannot be considered as the root cause of the weakness of SAARC. South Asia is a region that is diverse. The greater issue is that the institutional structure of SAARC is not able to translate diversity into differentiated yet mutually supporting forms of cooperation. The organization has mostly worked under all-member consensus model despite the capabilities, interests, vulnerabilities, and commitment of the member states having varying capabilities. As a result, political differences between the great powers may hinder collaboration between smaller states even in areas where the interests of the states overlap. This issue is especially significant since the modern issues of South Asia are becoming more and more transnational. The problem of climate change, floods, earthquakes, glacial melting, food insecurity, pandemics, energy scarcity, cyber threats, irregular migration, organized crime, maritime insecurity and economic disruptions cannot be effectively addressed using national policies only. The World Bank also highlights the importance of regional cooperation to enhance climate resilience, infrastructure, human capital, and economic connectivity in South Asia (World Bank, 2026).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Regionalism and the South Asian Context

Regionalism is a general term that is used to refer to political, economic, institutional and social processes by which states that are geographically close to each other form patterns of cooperation and institutionalized interaction. Regionalism does not always mean political integration and establishment of supranational institutions. Regional organizations can rather be formed on the basis of narrow functional goals, economic collaboration, security discourse, or social and environmental issues. The formation of South Asian regionalism was under very challenging circumstances. South Asia did not have a post-war settlement that

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

would promote reconciliation among the major powers as it was in Western Europe. South Asia was still very much affected by the India-Pakistan rivalry and national-security perceptions in comparison with Southeast Asia where ASEAN slowly evolved mechanisms to manage interstate differences (Dash, 2001; Chakma, 2020). Dash (2001) contends that regional cooperation can be sustained under a number of enabling conditions such as enabling regional leadership, good domestic institutions and political will to liberalize the economy. Inequalities in development of all three areas have been historical in South Asia. Chakma (2020) explains the South Asian regionalism in detail in three theoretical perspectives: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. His discussion shows that economic integration can not be applied to the analysis of SAARC since the development of this organization is rooted in the geopolitical system of South Asia. Dash (2008) also highlights the interplay between the institutional structures, governmental capabilities and domestic political preferences. His discussion indicates that the underdevelopment of the institutionalization of SAARC cannot be merely explained by the fact that there is interstate conflict; it is also the domestic political interests that affect the readiness and ability of governments to make regional commitments.

2.2 SAARC and the Problem of Political Conflict

India-Pakistan relations are a significant structural constraint that is consistently mentioned in the literature. According to Pattanaik (2006), a lack of trust, domestic political factors, sovereignty sensitivities and different security goals have limited the capability of SAARC to fulfill its institutional goals. Likewise, the analysis of South Asian regionalism by SIPRI notes that direct cooperation in regional security has traditionally been constrained due to the hostile relationship between India and Pakistan, asymmetries between India and its smaller neighbors and other regional security issues (Bailes, 2007). Nathan (2010) offers a comparative approach by looking at South Asia as well as Southern Africa. He claims that the position of a leading regional power can either support or inhibit regionalism based on the strategic orientation and association of the power to regional institutions. The insight applies especially to South Asia since India can provide public-goods to the region due to its economic, demographic, military, and geographic superiority, and faces the threat of asymmetry by smaller states.

2.3 Beyond the India–Pakistan Explanation

Though the India-Pakistan rivalry is the core of the problem, the simplification of the problems of SAARC by the bilateral conflict is a simplistic explanation. The domestic political systems, economic interests, foreign-policy orientations and the perceptions of regional leadership are different in South Asian states. As an illustration, smaller states might at the same time want to have access to the Indian large market and want to have institutional arrangements that safeguard their political and economic independence. There are varied strategic and economic connections of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka with India, China and other foreign powers. Another level of complexity is the political instability and geopolitical location of Afghanistan. The study of subregional cooperation by Nuruzzaman shows that local politics can influence the attitude towards regional projects. In Bangladesh, as an example, subregional cooperation plans between India, Bhutan and Nepal came to be a domestic political issue and rivalry in understanding of sovereignty and national interest (Nuruzzaman, 1999). Therefore, it is not a mere India-Pakistan two-sided conflict that is the issue of SAARC. It is a larger issue of governance that is associated with asymmetry, sovereignty, domestic politics, strategic competition, and the differences in the interpretation of the regional order.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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3. Theoretical Framework

This paper combines four theoretical approaches; neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism, and resilience theory.

3.1 Neorealism

Neorealism focuses on the impacts of international anarchy, relative gains, power distributions and security competition on the behavior of states. In this regard, regional organizations are limited in cases where member states feel that collaboration can empower an enemy or weaken national security. This argument is very applicable to South Asia. The rivalry in security perceptions between India and Pakistan has been a barrier to collaboration in sensitive areas in the past. The regional arrangements can also be perceived by smaller states in the context of power asymmetry. Therefore, regional organizations cannot be separated of the allocation of power. Chakma (2020) shows that neorealist explanations are applicable to the South Asian regionalism, especially in the context of how the regional balance of power influences the institutional development.

3.2 Neoliberal Institutionalism

According to neoliberal institutionalism, institutions can help in cooperation by lowering transaction costs, developing information, setting expectations, overseeing commitments and providing repetitive interaction among states. In this sense, the presence of conflict does not necessarily kill cooperation. States can cooperate by institutions permitting them to divide spheres of common advantage and spheres of political conflict. The success of the SAARC in its functions is evidence of this possibility. The experience in the areas of cooperation in education, culture, health, agriculture, food security, disaster management, and technical areas shows that the cooperation between the regions is possible even in the case of hard political relations (Ahmed, 2013).

3.3 Constructivism

Constructivism focuses on identities, norms, historical accounts and perceptions. The politics of the region in South Asia is highly shaped by the rival discourses of nationalism, sovereignty, religion, ethnicity, colonial history and national identity. Constructivist viewpoint on regional cooperation implies that it does not only need material incentives but also the creation of common understanding of the meaning of regional membership. Even the SAARC Charter itself tries to create such a regional identity by underlining the similarities in historical and cultural connections and the significance of understanding each other (SAARC, 1985). Nevertheless, the formation of regional identity can be weakened by the conflicting national discourses. According to Pattanaik (2006), states have occasionally developed their neighbors as enemies, which strengthens the distrust and opposing security agendas.

3.4 Resilience Theory

The dimension of resilience gives another aspect of analysis. Instead of posing the question of whether or not SAARC has been deeply integrated, resilience poses the question of whether or not the regional institutions are able to absorb shocks, adjust to changing conditions, continue to perform necessary functions and learn through crises. This view is becoming more significant due to the fact that South Asia is experiencing overlapping shocks. The climate catastrophes, pandemics, economic crises, food insecurity, energy deficit, and political instability introduce types of vulnerability beyond national borders. A strong SAARC would then not be necessarily an organization that is politically united. It would be one that can continue to work effectively even when there is a political difference.

4. Methodology

This paper uses a comparative institutional analysis and process tracing research design that is based on a qualitative research design. The analysis is a synthesis of primary institutional documents (SAARC Charter and official

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

regional policy documents) and secondary academic literature and reports of international organizations. The study concentrates on the time since the inception of SAARC in 1985 to the modern era but the main focus is on the institutional development of the organization and the dynamic regional landscape. Process tracing is used to establish causality between the political conditions and institutional performance patterns in the region. The paper will look at five general areas such as economic integration, connectivity, security cooperation, human security and environmental/disaster resilience. These areas were chosen since they demonstrate various degrees of political sensitivity and can be compared to the areas where cooperation has proved to be relatively possible and those where geopolitical rivalry has limited collective action. The paper also uses a comparative institutional approach, which selectively utilizes the ASEAN and sub-regional projects like the BBIN and BIMSTEC. Such comparisons do not imply that South Asia should simply imitate other organizations in the region. Instead, they define institutional mechanisms that can be possibly applied to the South Asian context.

5. South Asia's Regional Diversity

5.1 Political Diversity

South Asia is a region with parliamentary democracies, hybrid political systems, monarchies, and a state with a long history of political instability. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have very different institutional design and political practice in their political systems. This diversity has two contrary impacts. On the one hand, the heterogeneity of politics makes it difficult to make a decision together. Institutional diversity, on the other hand, does not imply that regional cooperation is not possible. It is shown by regional organizations like ASEAN that states of various political systems can collaborate in case there is overlapping of functional interests. It is not the issue of political diversity but rather the lack of sufficiently flexible institutional mechanisms that is more important.

5.2 Economic Diversity

The economies of South Asia have significant differences in terms of size, productive power, geographical features, resource endowments and levels of development. India is the largest economy in the region with Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Afghanistan having very small economic bases. Asymmetry in the economy creates opportunities and issues. The market in India opens up regional trade, investment, supply chain and infrastructure. Smaller states might however be afraid of being reliant on the largest economy in the region. According to the World Bank, poor connectivity, tariff protection, non-tariff barriers, investment restrictions and lack of trust are some of the key barriers to regional trade. It approximates that intraregional trade might be much higher than it is at the moment of about 23 billion (World Bank, 2026).

5.3 Social and Cultural Diversity

The South Asian region is characterized by a remarkable linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. This diversity has traditionally led to the rich cross-border social networks, and has also come into contact with state-building and national identity. Regionalism must thus deal with a basic contradiction: South Asia has a high level of civilizational interconnectedness and the modern political structure is founded on sovereign nation-states. This conflict does not have to be destructive. It may turn into a resource in case SAARC promotes educational interactions, cross-cultural collaboration, academic networks, tourism, involvement of youth, and cross-border professional communities.

5.4 Strategic Diversity

The South Asian states have various strategic relations with the major external powers such as China, the United States, and Russia, the Gulf States, the European Union and the Southeast Asian countries. As a result, there is no guarantee that regional states will have the same perceptions of the international system. This heterogeneity makes it more difficult to

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

formulate shared foreign-policy views, but does not bar effective collaboration. In fact, the condition of foreign-policy congruence prior to engaging in pragmatic cooperation would put an unduly high premium on regionalism.

6. Major Challenges Facing SAARC

6.1 India–Pakistan Rivalry

India-Pakistan relationship is one of the biggest structural limitations to SAARC. The issue is institutional, as well as bilateral. Since SAARC is a consensus-based organization, a worsening of relations between two key members can impact the organization in terms of collective agenda. The example of the 19th SAARC Summit, which was to be held in Islamabad in 2016, but was postponed because of bilateral tensions, demonstrates that the impact of organization-wide consequences can be caused by bilateral tensions (Chakma, 2020). This gives rise to what can be termed as the regional hostage problem: collaboration between a number of states might be limited due to political differences between two members. It does not necessarily mean that bilateral disputes should not be a part of regional politics; the Charter is already doing this formally. Instead, SAARC needs institutional processes that will enable non-contentious cooperation to persist in the event that high politics is stalemated.

6.2 Power Asymmetry

The large demographic, economic, military and geographic mass of India poses a structural imbalance. The institutions in the region often have a dilemma in which the leading state is involved. When the hegemony state has excessive power, other members might be intimidated by it. Unless the leading state offers adequate political and economic leadership, the regional efforts might not have impetus. The example of the comparison of SAARC and SADC by Nathan shows that varying institutional results can be achieved by different strategies of regional powers (Nathan, 2010). In the case of SAARC, this implies that smaller states should have institutional guarantees of the regional leadership.

6.3 Consensus and Veto Effects

Consensus safeguards the sovereignty and no state is formally coerced into undesired commitments. Institutional flexibility can however be diminished by consensus. The SAARC Charter clearly puts the unanimity as the foundation of decision-making and rules out bilateral and controversial issues (SAARC Secretariat, 2020). Another possible reform would not necessarily involve the need to forego unanimity. Alternatively, SAARC might consider creating variable-geometry cooperation in which a group of interested member states carries out projects under the umbrella of the SAARC, as long as these projects are not closed to other members. This would maintain the sovereignty principle and minimize the potential of unrelated conflicts to hamper effective collaboration.

6.4 Weak Implementation Capacity

A gap between declarations and implementation is one of the issues that SAARC has struggled with. The organization has come up with many agreements and institutions, but their implementation is often subject to national governments having other priorities and administrative capabilities. According to Ahmed (2013), SAARC has shown improvement in less controversial fields but has exhibited a big gap between promises and action especially in sensitive security fields.

The institutional weakness thus works on various levels:

1. limited enforcement capacity;
2. inadequate monitoring mechanisms;
3. insufficient financial resources;
4. bureaucratic delays;
5. weak private-sector participation;
6. inconsistent national implementation;
7. Limited public awareness.

Empowering SAARC therefore does not only entail more agreements but more powerful implementation mechanisms.

7. Economic Integration: Challenge and Opportunity

One of the most significant spheres where South Asian regionalism could bring about

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

tangible benefits is economic integration. According to the World Bank, intraregional trade is about 5 percent of the total trade of South Asia and the actual trade is very low compared to its potential. Regional trade is limited by high transportation expenses, border controls, tariffs, non-tariff barriers, investment barriers and political mistrust (World Bank, 2026). Previous World Bank studies also discovered that trade costs in South Asia were much greater than in East Asia and that the lack of connectivity also led to the low integration in the region. The issue with the economy is not thus a lack of potential but rather the high transaction costs.

SAFTA

The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was a significant effort to enhance economic integration in the region. It was signed in 2004 and came into effect in 2006. Non-tariff barriers, political tensions, and limited liberalization have however limited the implementation due to sensitive lists. Rodríguez-Delgado (2007) concluded that SAFTA may generate economic benefits but also highlighted that the distribution of benefits may vary across individual nations and this implies that there may be a need to have mechanisms to deal with the adjustment costs and distributional issues. This is especially crucial to South Asia since smaller economies might have a different perception of regional liberalization as compared to larger economies.

8. Connectivity as a Foundation of Regional Resilience

Another significant opportunity is physical connectivity. The geography of South Asia opens up massive opportunities of road, rail, maritime, aviation, energy and digital connectivity. But often political boundaries cut across historically related economic spaces. UNESCAP studies claim that South Asia can benefit a lot by enhancing both hard and soft infrastructure as well as minimizing cross-border disputes that hinder connectivity (De & Kumarasamy, 2020). Political benefits can also be created through connectivity.

Improved connectivity:

1. lowers transaction costs;
2. expands markets;
3. facilitates tourism;
4. promotes regional value chains;
5. improves access to landlocked states;
6. facilitates disaster response;
7. strengthens energy cooperation;
8. Forms constituencies interested in peace.

The efforts of the World Bank towards regional integration also recognize connectivity as one of the key pillars of enhanced South Asian cooperation (World Bank, 2026).

9. Energy Cooperation

Energy is particularly a promising field as the states of South Asia have complementary resources. Nepal and Bhutan have a lot of potential in hydropower, India has a huge market of electricity, Bangladesh has a huge energy requirement and Pakistan and Sri Lanka have their own energy security issues. Trade in electricity across the borders can thus yield the mutual benefits without the need of extensive political integration. The World Bank has also found regional electricity cooperation as a significant opportunity with significant potential economic gains of regional electricity markets (World Bank, 2026). The energy cooperation can also be transformative as it establishes interdependence in a strategically significant area. A local energy network would slowly create: interdependence; investment; integration of infrastructure; technical collaboration; common regulatory practices; increased trust between governments.

10. Climate Change and Environmental Resilience

The problem of climate change offers, perhaps, the best example of why South Asian states should cooperate on a regional level. South Asia is characterized by common river systems, mountain ecosystems, coastline, monsoon systems and atmospheric conditions. Floods, cyclones, droughts, heat waves, glacier melting, sea-level rise and water stresses do not acknowledge national boundaries. Climate resilience is one of the pillars of regional

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
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Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

cooperation as identified by the World Bank and the need to have cross-border solutions (World Bank, 2026). Climate cooperation might involve: regional flood-warning systems; joint meteorological data; Himalayan glacier surveillance; coastal resilience plans; regional disaster-response plans; trans boundary river management; climate-finance plans; renewable-energy plans; climate-resilient agriculture. The political benefit of such initiatives is significant: they can create practical benefits without having to agree on controversial issues of territories.

11. Human Security as a New Foundation for SAARC

Conventional security strategies are state-centric, military, border, and strategic competition. The approach of human-security extends the concept to incorporate the threats to people and society. South Asia is confronted with various human-security issues: poverty; food insecurity; public-health crisis; environmental degradation; displacement; calamities; unemployment; gender inequality; water insecurity; organized crime. These concerns provide an opportunity to SAARC since they are not usually politically sensitive as compared to traditional issues of military-security. According to Ahmed (2013), the more visible progress of SAARC has been made in other areas like poverty reduction, health, human-resource development, education and other less controversial aspects of human security. This implies a strategic point: SAARC might be more robust when it starts with people-oriented collaboration instead of high politics.

12. Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness

The COVID-19 showed how national systems are susceptible to trans boundary shocks.

Pandemic preparedness requires:

1. disease surveillance;
2. information sharing;
3. vaccine cooperation;
4. pharmaceutical supply chains;
5. laboratory networks;
6. emergency medical logistics;
7. Coordinated border procedures.

South Asian states have a lot of experience in dealing with infectious-disease issues, yet institutional fragmentation is an issue. Enhanced regional health-security architecture may thus be a low-politics way of achieving new regional collaboration. Instead of developing a large supranational health bureaucracy, SAARC might develop a regional disease surveillance system, common emergency response plans and stockpiles of basic medical supplies.

13. Food and Water Security

Another area where regional interdependence is inevitable is food and water security. The common climatic systems, availability of water, flow of rivers and cross-border ecological conditions affect agricultural production.

The regional cooperation may include:

agricultural research networks;
seed banks;
food-security information systems;
regional grain reserves;
climate-smart agriculture;
water-data sharing;
early-warning mechanisms.

The main problem is that water is both an economic and a strategic concern. This would mean that SAARC would have to decouple technical cooperation and controversial sovereignty issues as much as possible.

14. Subregionalism: Complement or Alternative?

The emergence of sub regional cooperation has been one of the most significant South Asian regionalism developments.

Examples include:

1. BBIN- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal;
2. BIMSTEC;
3. South Asian Growth Quadrangle;
4. Bilateral economic corridors;
5. Regional electricity initiatives.

Chakma (2020) notes that regionalism led by SAARC can be complemented or watered down by sub regional and trans regional efforts. Sub regionalism does not necessarily have to be considered as a rivalry to SAARC. Rather, it can be used as a test bed of collaboration. In

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An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

the cases where the collaboration of all eight states is a politically challenging task, a smaller group can possibly conduct projects faster. Effective projects can be then scaled up.

This implies a nesting regionalism model where:

The broad political and normative framework is offered by SAARC, and various implementation mechanisms are offered by sub regional organizations.

This kind of arrangement would enable the regional diversity to be an institutional resource and not a hindrance.

15. Lessons from ASEAN Without Assuming Replication

The example of ASEAN is often used comparatively to SAARC. However, institutional transplantation would be wrong since South Asia and Southeast Asia are not in the same historical, geopolitical and security contexts. However, ASEAN has a number of institutional lessons. To begin with, gradualism may be beneficial. ASEAN failed to become a full-fledged regional organization. Second, political differences can be dealt with through informal diplomacy. Third, economic cooperation is able to establish constituencies that favor further regional interaction. Fourth, regional institutions may endure the political differences in case member states are committed to dialogue. Studies of regionalism in South Asia also focus on the fact that regional institutions are able to establish confidence-building institutions despite the presence of political tensions (Gordon, 2009). The right lesson to be learnt by SAARC is not to become ASEAN, but to build institutions that suit the South Asian politics.

18. Discussion

The fact is that the institutional weakness of SAARC cannot be attributed to one variable. There are three interacting structures which are of special significance. The most apparent restriction is the India-Pakistan rivalry. The overall organization has been hit severally by bilateral tensions. Sovereignty is safeguarded by consensus decision making and bilateral disputes are excluded, yet this may expose the organization to political stalemate. The existence of large differences in the economic size, state capacity, geography, and development creates varying expectations about the regional integration. The three structures complement one another. Economic integration is restrained by political mistrust. Lack of economic integration makes the region less united towards peace. The institutional capacity is limited, thus, it is hard to overcome political disputes. The outcome is under-integration cycle. Nevertheless, this cycle can be broken as the same analysis shows. Cooperation can be functional to produce positive-sum results. Confidence can be established through positive-sum cooperation. Institutional interaction can be increased by confidence. The political costs of cooperation can be decreased over time by institutional interaction. In this way, it is possible to perceive regionalism as a process and not as an end-state.

19. Policy Recommendation

To enhance the resilience and effectiveness of SAARC, member states are advised to embrace a multi-layered, flexible, approach to regional cooperation that can be accommodative of the political, economic and strategic diversity of South Asia. SAARC should focus on functional cooperation on less politically controversial issues like climate change, disaster management, public health, food and water security, energy, digital connectivity, education and facilitation of trade without linking these areas to bilateral political differences. The organization must also bring in more flexibility by having variable-geometry structures that enable the willing member states to engage in subregional initiatives without necessarily involving all the members at the same time, but leave such initiatives open to other SAARC countries. The capacity of the SAARC Secretariat to be technical, monitoring and implementation is also important to be strengthened, especially with specific targets, periodic progress reviews and closer integration with the national institutions. Considering the structural economic hegemony of India, regional programs must include protective and

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

compensatory measures that take into account the interests of smaller member states and guarantee more equal distribution of the benefits. In addition, SAARC needs to enhance regional connectivity by means of transport corridors, cross-border electricity trade, digital infrastructure, and facilitating trade, and extending relationships between governments, universities, businesses, and civil society. Lastly, the creation of a SAARC Regional Resilience Fund would be able to fund cross-border initiatives pertaining to climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, health security, food security, and sustainable infrastructure. These would help SAARC to shift its focus more towards implementation-oriented and more resilient regional institution rather than a more declaration-based organization that can continue to be functional in its cooperation despite the ongoing geopolitical differences.

20. Conclusion

The South Asian regionalism is in a challenging contradiction. The area is very interrelated socially, geographically, economically and environmentally but the political institutions are disintegrated. In 1985, the South Asian states responded to this paradox by forming an institutionalized regional cooperation through the formation of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Its Charter offers a grandiose economic development, social development, cultural collaboration, collective self-reliance and mutual understanding (SAARC, 1985). However, the experience of SAARC also shows the constraints of regionalism where institutional structures are faced with geopolitical competition, power imbalance, domestic political factors, and lack of capacity to implement. The main conclusion of the research is that the idea of regional diversity does not necessarily contradict regional cooperation. The issue is that when the institutions are not flexible enough to embrace diversity. South Asia does not need political homogeneity to build resilience in the region. It demands that it has mechanisms that can generate cooperation even in the face of political differences. The future of SAARC is thus not in trying to ensure that all the geopolitical differences are resolved before cooperation can be achieved but rather in the creation of institutional spaces in which cooperation can be achieved without the need to resolve the differences. This strategy does not mean that the conventional security conflicts are not applicable. Quite to the contrary, they are at the heart of the knowledge of the region. Nevertheless, by turning the resolution of those conflicts into a condition of all types of cooperation, it is practically providing geopolitical conflict with a veto on the whole regional agenda.

A stronger regional order would rather follow through the regions of common interest. Such spaces are climate change, disaster management, public health, food security, energy, connectivity, digitalization, education, and facilitation of trade. Whether or not it has evolved into an EU-style political or economic union should not therefore be used as the sole measure of the importance of SAARC. It's more realistic contribution can be its capacity to offer an institutional architecture whereby highly heterogeneous states can interact with each other repeatedly, find common interests, create regional public goods and build up over time habits of cooperation. Provided that SAARC can turn this principle into an institutional practice, regional diversity might be turned into strength, instead of a disintegrative force. In this regard, the future of South Asian regionalism will not be in the formation of a homogeneous region, but in the establishment of an institutional order that is flexible enough to hold differences together.

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