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THE SAARC PARADOX: UNITY AMID RIVALRY

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Abstract
The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a major effort to institutionalize the cooperation among the South Asian countries in the face of the existing geopolitical rivalry, political asymmetry and national interest. SAARC was founded in 1985 to foster collective self-reliance, economic development, social progress and understanding among the member countries. But its institutional development has been hindered by bilateral conflicts especially between India and Pakistan, unequal power dynamics, divergent security concerns and the unanimous voting rule. The paper discusses the paradox of regional unity in the midst of political rivalry by examining the historical grounds, institutional structure, geopolitical limitations, and possible options for revitalizing SAARC. The paper, based on regionalism theory, neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, posits that the problems of SAARC are not only due to regional diversity but also due to interplay of strategic distrust, sovereignty issues and lack of effective institutionalization of cooperation. It also says that SAARC is still relevant as South Asian nations are facing challenges in the areas of trade, public health, climate change, energy security and disaster management which are interconnected. It is concluded that flexible cooperation, confidence building measures, building regional institutions and issue based cooperation can help maintain the role of SAARC in the regionalism of the South Asian region.

1. Introduction
In today's global landscape, regional cooperation is emerging as a crucial element of international relations, fostering collaboration among nations to tackle mutual problems, boost regional economies, and enhance diplomatic efforts. Regional organizations offer institutional platforms for countries to act in their common interests, and for them to deal with the variations in the political systems, economic capacities and foreign policy emphases. But the effectiveness of regional organizations is not only dependent upon geographical proximity or on shared interests but is also a function of political trust and the efficacy of the institutions themselves and of member states' willingness to pursue common goals rather than narrow national interests (Acharya, 2014). In South Asia, the situation of regional cooperation is quite complex. Historical, cultural, linguistic and geographical interconnections are strong in the region, but interstate conflicts, territorial disputes, domestic political instability and economic and military power imbalance continue to impact the region. These have made it difficult to create a unified regional framework. SAARC was founded on 8th December 1985 to

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contribute to the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, to accelerate the economic growth and social development and to strengthen collective self-reliance among member countries (SAARC Secretariat, n.d.). Nevertheless, SAARC has not been able to attain the extent of institutional integration seen in other regional organizations. Intra-regional trade is not at its potential, regional connectivity is constrained, and summit diplomacy and multilateral efforts have been hindered by political disagreements on several occasions. The consensus-based working of the organization, and the fact that bilateral and contentious issues are never formally discussed, have contributed to making its participation politically acceptable to its members; but the organization has been constrained in addressing some of the key hurdles to cooperation (Dash, 2008; Rahman, 2005). The paradox in the region is that despite the fact that there are significant incentives for cooperation, yet there remain significant constraints to collective action in the region, which are the political divisions. The South Asian countries face common issues related to poverty, climate exposure, food security and health, energy needs and intra-regional economic growth. However, their answers are often nationally oriented and political distrust hampers the creation of regional solutions. The contradiction in the center of which is India-Pakistan relations. Both of these states have significant strategic, demographic and economic importance in South Asia, and their protracted conflicts have had a significant impact on the broader South Asian environment time and again. Meanwhile, the challenges of SAARC do not just lie in its bilateral ties. Regional cooperation is also shaped by the disparities in terms of economic potential, domestic political agendas, institutional structures and external power dynamics (Ganguly, 2016; Dash, 2008). The paper suggests that the interaction between geopolitical rivalry, power asymmetry, institutional constraints and lack of incentives for ongoing regional cooperation is responsible for the limited effectiveness of SAARC. But this doesn't make regionalism any less promising. SAARC, with functional cooperation, enhanced connectivity, confidence building measures and institutional adaptation, could help in addressing issues which individual South Asian countries cannot effectively handle individually.

2. Significance of Study

The main research issue is that the objectives of the regional cooperation are not in line with the performance of SAARC. While the members have a formal forum for dialogue and cooperation, the regional interest of the members has been difficult to turn into concrete political, economic and institutional results. The main question that arises is why, despite the physical proximity, the interconnectedness of societies and the common challenges of development, the region still has a low level of regional integration. Pattanaik (2006) pinpoints three factors of distrust, domestic political factors and sensitivity towards sovereignty as important reasons for the limited success of SAARC. All of the above indicate that the problems that the organization faces are not only administrative but political in nature, among its members. Also, due to consensus-based decision making in SAARC, it is difficult to work out joint efforts in the event of a disagreement among member countries on strategic priorities (SAARC, 1985). The research problem thus can be defined as the correlation of geopolitical rivalry and institutional effectiveness. It poses the question of whether such constraints of SAARC are a necessary result of the political climate of South Asia or whether other institutional structures would facilitate greater cooperation without forfeiting South Asian nations' sovereignty. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it analyzes the political divisions in the region and its potential for collective development. Climate-related disasters, water insecurity, infectious diseases, energy shortages and limited transport connectivity are some of the challenges in

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South Asia which are interconnected and transcend national boundaries. Good regional cooperation can contribute to the coordination of responses, better allocation of resources and greater economic opportunities for the States. According to the World Bank, there is significant untapped potential in South Asian trade as the volume of intraregional trade has been much lower than its potential. It also highlights the role of cross-border infrastructure, institutional cooperation and policy coordination in its regional integration efforts. This paper takes a political and institutional approach in studying SAARC to better understand that shared interests do not necessarily lead to collective action. It also highlights viable strategies for enhancing cooperation within the region, bearing in mind the respective countries' security interests.

3. Objectives

1. To examine the historical development and institutional foundations of SAARC.
2. To analyze how geopolitical rivalry, particularly between India and Pakistan, affects regional cooperation.
3. To assess the influence of power asymmetry, national sovereignty, and domestic politics on SAARC's institutional effectiveness.
4. To evaluate the economic and social consequences of limited regional integration.
5. To identify opportunities for strengthening regional resilience and revitalizing cooperation among SAARC members.

4. Methodology

The method used in this paper is qualitative which is an explanatory method using secondary sources. It uses academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official SAARC documents and international institutional reports to analyze the political and institutional aspects of the cooperation in South Asia. Using qualitative document analysis, the study found that the themes of strategic distrust, sovereignty, power asymmetry, institutional constraints, economic interdependence and regional resilience emerged. It also adopts a theory-based perspective to analyze the nature of the connection between state interests and multilateral cooperation. The theoretical approach is based on the neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and regionalism theory. These views provide various reasons why states can see the value of cooperation while at the same time being hesitant to move towards greater regional integration. The study does not pretend to present new statistical tests or results of primary fieldwork. Its conclusions are based on analytical interpretations of the existing literature and institutional evidence.

5. Historical Background of SAARC

The charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was signed in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 8 December 1985. It was originally established by the members of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan has joined in 2007 making the organization eight members (SAARC Secretariat, n.d.). The formation of SAARC showed that the countries in the region had common developmental issues, which would be best resolved with cooperation. Its charter highlighted economic development, social advancement, cultural development, self-reliance and understanding amongst each other. It also laid down the principle of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence and non-interference in the internal affairs (SAARC, 1985). The organization was therefore set up in such a way as to enable cooperation without a supranational political decision over its members. This enabled regional involvement to be compatible with varying political systems and foreign policy priorities. It also, however, implied that the organization would be highly reliant on the goodwill of the sovereign states. SAARC over the years evolved mechanisms for cooperation in various fields such as trade, agriculture, education, health, culture, poverty

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reduction and disaster management. The South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement and the South Asian Free Trade Area were significant initiatives towards facilitating economic interchanges and regional market integration. However, it was not the case that institutional growth resulted in similar gains in political cooperation. Regional initiatives persisted in a political climate of interstate mistrust, and uneven economic development. Domestic politics, regional security concerns, and strategic interests of member states are important to understand the development of the organization, as Dash (2008) explains in his analysis of South Asian regionalism. There is an interesting contradiction in the founding principles of SAARC. Under article X of its charter, decisions are to be made unanimously at all levels and contentious and bilateral matters are not to be discussed. (SAARC, 1985). The purpose of these rules was to prevent member states from being dominated and to avoid bilateral issues taking over the agenda of the region. But at the same time, the consensus means that the will of one person can block the will of the others and stop collective decisions from being made. In addition, the exclusion of contentious issues may keep technical cooperation free of political conflicts, but also restricts the ability of the organisation to provide services in the event of disputes which could repeatedly affect the technical cooperation. This institutional paradox is indicative of the larger regionalism paradox: institutional designs that are intended to ensure participation and sovereignty may also lower the effectiveness of institutions.

6. Theoretical Framework

Neorealism (most notably Waltz 1979) sees the international system as a setting where states must seek to secure their interests and ensure their own survival, and in which there is no central authority to reliably do so. States thus focus much of their attention on relative power, strategic vulnerabilities and the intentions of other states. This view can account for the limited scope of regional cooperation in South Asia, in the face of geopolitical rivalry. India and Pakistan have always looked at each other through the prism of security competition with issues of territory, military strength and regional power also complicating bilateral interaction. In such a situation, governments might be reluctant to foster regional arrangements if they think that such cooperation might give strategic advantages to a competitor. The SAARC is unable to resolve conflicts on its own, which are beyond its capability, that its most influential members are not willing to resolve. The organization has a regional order that is based on state interests and unequal capabilities. It is only when governments see benefits that cooperation becomes possible, and when security issues outweigh collective goals, cooperation becomes fragile. There is an alternative explanation, that of neoliberal institutionalism. Keohane (1984) suggests that international institutions can help facilitate cooperation by decreasing uncertainty, enhancing information, allowing reciprocity, and lowering the costs of coordination. Despite the mostly self-serving nature of state concerns, institutions can help to make cooperation more viable. If this view is extended to SAARC, it implies that there is a role for regional institutions in fostering cooperation between the member states in areas where the benefits are great and the political costs are relatively small. Examples could include trade facilitation, disaster preparedness, public health, energy connectivity and climate adaptation. But where there is great mistrust of the political system or the perception is that benefits are not being spread fairly, it is difficult for institutions to ensure cooperation. The relatively weak enforcement mechanism and consensus-driven nature of SAARC hinders its implementation in the event of differences in national priorities. Thus, both institutional design and political commitment are crucial to the effectiveness of the organization. Regionalism theory is an attempt to analyze the regional level of institutional, inter-institutional and collective practices within the states and societies. As pointed out by Acharya (2014), regional orders

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vary depending on their historical experiences, political conditions and institutional traditions. Thus, regional integration is not a homogeneous process, having the same trajectory everywhere. There are a number of potential bases for regionalism in South Asia, such as geographical proximity, historical linkages, cultural exchanges, and economic and environmental interdependence. But these ties are not incompatible with other national identities, issues of sovereignty and conflicting security agendas. Börzel and Risse (2016) show how regionalism varies between world regions and is contingent on political and institutional factors. Thus, South Asian regionalism must be evaluated in South Asian context that is not only in reference to the European Union model of integration. These theories, when combined, offer a complete explanation of the SAARC paradox. Security competition and power asymmetry are constraints on cooperation (as per neorealism). Neoliberal institutionalism is the process of determining how institutional arrangements can encourage collective action in the face of countervailing national interests. Historical context, common practices and locally relevant integration forms are important aspects of regionalism theory. The main analytical hypothesis of this paper is that these factors are interdependent and the functioning of SAARC is dependent on the interaction among them. Strategic rivalry produces political barriers to decision-making; institutional procedures shape the impact of strategic rivalry on decision-making; functional cooperation provides opportunities to continue regional engagement in the face of unresolved strategic rivalry.

7. Major Challenges Facing SAARC

7.1 India–Pakistan rivalry

The rivalry between India and Pakistan is a major hurdle to the cooperation of the South Asian region. The legacy of partition, territorial disputes, wars, security competition and multiple diplomatic crises have influenced their relationship. Such conflicts have often spilled over into the broader regional context given the fact that both these countries are key players in SAARC. The competition poses challenges to regional cooperation in a number of ways. Firstly, it undermines political confidence and leads to a more hesitant approach by governments towards regional initiatives. Secondly, it can affect the multilateral level of diplomatic engagement. Third, it makes it easier for the government to give priority to the national security concerns rather than regional economic and social goals. Pattanaik (2006) states that the trust deficit between the key players in the region, along with domestic political factors and sensitivity over sovereignty has helped to limit the accomplishments of the SAARC. Ganguly (2016) also shows how historical wars and domestic politics have played a role in the India–Pakistan relations. However, the India–Pakistan conflict should not be the only reason to the problems faced by SAARC. Other member states' differences and capacity for implementation also play a role, as do institutional constraints. The entirety of an explanation needs to take into account the relationship of bilateral conflict to the broader regional political system. They would need confidence-building measures, stable diplomatic contacts and guarantees of non-contentious regional projects to be protected from bilateral crises to be possible. SAARC is not meant to directly resolve bilateral conflicts but a conducive political environment would pave the way for its collaborative efforts.

7.2 Power asymmetry and unequal influence

There are significant disparities between South Asian countries in terms of population, economic power and military strength, geography and diplomatic influence. India is in a specific position in view of its size, economic weight and strategic capabilities. Smaller states may thus feel vulnerable to being dominated by a larger neighbor or to the fact that regional organizations might be skewed to the interests of the strongest state. Cooperation can be difficult despite formal equality of members' sovereignty where there is power imbalance. Smaller states may welcome regional

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integration where it opens up market access, connectivity, or collective bargaining opportunities and reject regional integration that they deem inadequate with respect to their national interests. The issue is not one of India being more powerful than other members. Instead, it is about the interplay between unequal abilities and notions of fairness, autonomy and benefit sharing. Acharya (2014) points out the need to understand regional orders in their particular political contexts and Dash (2008) argues that South Asian cooperation must be understood in the context of a wider regional political and security framework. However, it can only be met with transparent decision making, with smaller members consulted, through an equitable design of the project and better systems for evaluating the distribution of benefits.

7.3 Institutional constraints and consensus-based decision-making

Sovereign equality and unanimity are the core principles of the institutional framework of SAARC. While these principles uphold the independence of member countries, they also limit the action of the organization when member countries disagree. According to Article X of the SAARC Charter bilateral and contentious issues are not to be discussed and all decisions have to be unanimous (SAARC, 1985). This setup is a challenging institutional balance. As the contentious issues are excluded, then the remaining technical areas may be left for cooperation, but on the other hand, the unanimous decision may delay the progress. One challenge related to implementation. A regional declaration or agreement does not guarantee national governments will make adequate resources available, or that they will put in place national procedures or agreed timeframes. There is a need for effective follow-up, reliable information and political support to turn commitments into concrete results at the regional level. The literature on SAARC indicates that institutional constraints should not be viewed as the sole reason for the failure of the organization, but rather as a part of the problem and complementing political distrust and domestic priorities (Pattanaik, 2006; Dash, 2008). Potential changes include the establishment of more transparent timetables for the implementation of reforms, regular reporting on the progress of reforms, enhanced technical cooperation and voluntary pilot projects between members willing to implement, where the charter allows. These changes would enhance the performance of the institutions without an immediate change in the basic principles of the institutions.

7.4 Economic fragmentation and limited regional trade

Economic fragmentation is another key aspect of the SAARC paradox. However, South Asian countries are not trading much with each other despite the proximity and very significant potential for complementarity in economic transactions, as compared to several other regional groups. According to the World Bank, South Asian countries' intraregional trade represents about 5% of their total trade and the World Bank estimates that the actual level of intraregional trade in the region is significantly lower than its potential. These estimates show the magnitude of the opportunities that are not being realized, but the shares and potential estimates are dependent on the time period and methodology used. This is due to a number of factors such as tariff and non-tariff barriers, transport constraints, complex border processes, investment restrictions and political mistrust. Weak regional integration and insufficient connectivity limit the economic opportunities border regions have, as demonstrated by Cali et al. (2014). But there are political implications of economic fragmentation. Restricted cross-border trade decreases the number of companies, jobs and localities that have a vested interest in keeping regional relations open. This can undermine the domestic constituencies which may be in favor of greater cooperation. More than formal tariff reductions would be needed to improve the trade in the region.

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7.5 Domestic politics and national sovereignty

Domestic political conditions as well as relations among states impact regional cooperation. Governments, influenced by elections, change of government, nationalistic narratives, public opinion and domestic security concerns can all affect how they approach regional initiatives. Political leaders might feel that they can see benefits from confrontation with a neighbor, but not those from regional cooperation, and that the rewards are shorter-term. Governments can also prevent themselves from making agreements that they think could be interpreted as eroding their sovereignty or national security. Domestic political issues and sensitivities of sovereignty are important factors that constrain SAARC, according to Pattanaik (2006). Such factors can cause regional initiatives to be subject to shifts in political leadership and public opinion. This is especially important if long-term coordination is necessary for regional projects. In the case of transport corridors, energy networks, educational exchanges and trade agreements, these require ongoing efforts through several administrations. Major shifts in regional policy at each change in government make continuity for successful integration more difficult.

7.6 External geopolitical competition

The role of outside powers is also affecting south Asian regionalism. Regional states' strategic decisions and policies on infrastructure, trade and security are influenced by relationships with China, the United States and other international actors. There are opportunities for external partnerships, with investment, technology, and access to larger markets. But it could also serve to exacerbate the differences between South Asian governments under certain conditions of strategic competition, where their external alignments differ. If states view each other's external partnerships as being primarily competitive security, then regional cooperation may be more challenging. This does not imply that SAARC can't have any interaction with outside forces. External investment and international cooperation can supplement regional development provided that projects are transparent, economical and fit in with regional priorities. The key challenge is to ensure that the external partnerships complement and do not supplant South Asian state cooperation.

8. Opportunities for Revitalizing SAARC

The most pragmatic way of rejuvenating SAARC is to enhance cooperation in those fields where there are definite common interests among the member states. Functional cooperation is not to condition progress on the resolution of all political differences, but to deal with specific problems via technical agreements and joint initiatives. Keohane (1984) proposes that institutions can help facilitate cooperation through the provision of information, uncertainty reduction and by providing reciprocal action. If it were applied in South Asia, it would focus on programs in public health, agricultural research, disaster management, education and environmental protection. For instance, member states could work on sharing of meteorological data, on training in disaster-response in the region, and on setting up joint research projects on crop resilience. These programmes would not solve territorial issues, but they could show that regional co-operation has tangible benefits for the citizens. The economic cooperation is another option for rejuvenating SAARC. Increased regional trade and investment can foster common economic interests, which could serve as a motivation for governments and non-governmental actors to continue stable relations. The World Bank's regional integration research shows that there are significant gaps between the levels of intraregional trade and the potential levels in the region. Coordinated efforts to improve customs procedures, transport infrastructure, standards recognition and investment rules would be needed to fill this gap. SAARC members should focus on concrete actions like digitised documentation process at customs, better functioning of the border management

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system, better transport connectivity, and transparency in cross-border business transactions. Governments can also foster regional value chains in the agriculture, textile, pharmaceutical and other industries where complementary capabilities exist. For sustained regional cooperation, political confidence is a must. CBMs can alleviate uncertainty, keep the lines of communication open in crisis situations and prevent disagreements from impacting all aspects of regional engagement. South Asian governments can help to facilitate regular diplomatic contacts, keep the communication lines open during periods of tension and ensure that existing technical cooperation is not cut needlessly. There is a potential for additional channels of contacts, such as academic exchanges, cultural initiatives and professional dialogue, to complement official diplomacy. In this context, India – Pakistan relations are of utmost significance. SAARC's charter avoids to address bilateral and contentious matters, but better bilateral relations would create more conducive political environment for regional cooperation to function (SAARC, 1985). There is a need to enhance implementation of existing Agreements in SAARC. But, not only the number of agreements adopted is important for institutional effectiveness, governments must also provide resources, adhere to timelines, and report on progress. Technical coordination could be improved, standardized progress reports could be implemented and indicators could be made more explicit for assessing regional projects. Secretariat and relevant bodies could assist in identifying the difficulties in implementation and exchange of good practices. But institutional changes should be in harmony with the SAARC Charter and the member states' willingness to join. Changes that need formal agreement should be sought via the appropriate intergovernmental processes. However, greater monitoring, better project management and better communication could increase the effectiveness of the projects within this framework, without necessarily having to restructure the institutions. Another opportunity is to consider making provisions for mutual support in practical areas on voluntary basis in the member states where their interests converge without compromising the regional goals of SAARC. The SAARC Charter allows for the establishment of Action Committees with more than two, but not all member countries to implement specific projects (SAARC, 1985). This provision shows that there is already a mechanism in the organization for cooperation among subsets of members in appropriate circumstances. Regional cooperation projects may be realized through issue-based cooperation, such as electricity connectivity, cooperation in the field of disaster management, research cooperation or protection of the environment. It would not be the goal to establish parallel institutions, but to make practical advances where there is consensus. Especially promising for regional cooperation are the opportunities arising from climate change and environmental vulnerability. There are interlinked risks of floods, cyclones, heatwaves, water stress and disruption of agriculture in South Asian countries. Information sharing and coordinated response is often necessary for these threats. SAARC countries might want to strengthen their regional early-warning systems, work together on disaster-risk reduction, share knowledge on adaptation to climate change and fund research on resilient agriculture and water management. Joint training and technical networks may enable governments to be more effective in responding to cross-border emergencies as well. The activities can be implemented in parallel with the development goals outlined in the SAARC Charter (SAARC, 1985). They also can be less politically charged than talks on territorial disputes or strategic competition.

9. Policy Recommendations

9.1 Prioritize achievable regional initiatives

In the beginning, SAARC countries should focus on projects with well-defined goals and quantifiable benefits and relatively low political costs. Examples of potential starting points include public health, agricultural research,

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disaster management, education and environmental monitoring. Governments should set realistic timeframes, designate responsible government agencies and monitor outcomes regularly. Showing tangible benefits will increase trust in regional cooperation and serve as a basis for more ambitious cooperation.

9.2 Improve implementation and accountability

Follow up mechanisms for regional agreements should be enhanced, including by establishing standard reporting processes, quantifiable performance indicators and regular technical reviews at the member state level. Information-sharing and identification of the difficulties in implementation should be facilitated through the SAARC Secretariat and relevant bodies. Such measures should take into account the intergovernmental nature of the organization, and enhance transparency and continuity. The success of regional cooperation should be measured in terms of projects completed and tangible results, not declarations adopted.

9.3 Strengthen economic and transport connectivity

Governments need to lower unnecessary trade barriers, and ease customs clearance, border infrastructure and reliable transportation links. Non-tariff barriers and uneven administrative requirements which make cross-border trade more expensive should also be dealt with in the regional initiatives. Special focus should be paid to small and medium enterprises and border communities that can gain a lot from access to neighboring markets. Clear and fair guidelines and necessary measures for less developed members would facilitate obtaining the benefits of economic integration that are widely shared.

9.4 Protect technical cooperation from political crises

In the event of a decline in diplomatic relations between the members of the SAARC, it is important that ongoing technical programs are continued. Governments might consider continuity measures relating to health collaboration, disaster relief, scientific cooperation and other areas of mutual benefit. Structured communication and problem-solving processes for implementation would be helpful in avoiding political disagreements that might otherwise impede successful projects in shared interests. These would not be a substitute for diplomacy or solve bilateral disputes, but would limit the impact of political crises on non-contentious aspects.

9.5 Promote confidence-building and inclusive dialogue

Regular diplomatic contacts and exchanges at the academic, cultural and professional levels should be fostered between regional governments. Confidence building measures need to be step-by-step, reciprocal and in line with national interests. There should be opportunities to involve the smaller member states meaningfully in agenda-setting and project design, and public communication should be made about the practical impacts of regional projects. This could be complemented by the involvement of universities, research institutions, businesses and civil society organizations, which could enhance the social bases of cooperation and complement official diplomacy.

9.6 Expand regional cooperation on climate and disaster risks

Greater mechanisms need to be established among the members of SAARC for the exchange of weather data, coordination in disaster preparedness, climate research and assistance to vulnerable communities. Early-warning systems in the region could be enhanced and effective adaptation practices could be shared through regional technical networks. Projects should be accompanied by clearly defined responsibilities, easy access to information, and fair participation. Member states could highlight the benefits of regional cooperation even if there are differences of opinion on more politically sensitive issues, by emphasizing shared risks and outcomes.

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9.7 Use flexible cooperation within the SAARC framework

Under the charter and agreed procedures, willing members should seek joint action in areas where interests coincide, and allow for more regional participation where possible. Such projects should be carried out in conjunction with SAARC's overall institutional architecture. Governments need to have clear participation criteria, make results public, and invite other members to join successful programs. Flexible cooperation could help to minimize the delays that may be caused by the differences between all members, as long as it does not create a means to increase the political exclusion and does not jeopardize the regional purpose of the organization.

9.8 Develop a long-term regional vision

SAARC countries should formulate a credible cooperation plan in the region that links the projects with long term development goals. This agenda should include shared priorities, responsibilities, review periods, and take differences in national capacity into consideration. Governments should regularly assess the effectiveness of regional initiatives in generating economic, social and environmental benefits. Such a vision, if credible in the long term, would provide continuity over political changes and strengthen the sense that regional cooperation is a realistic way of tackling shared problems, and not an alternative to national sovereignty.

10. Conclusion

The SAARC paradox highlights the problem of establishing effective regional institutions in a context of political rivalry, unequal power and strong national sovereignty. SAARC has been established since 1985 and has been offering an institutional platform for the economic development, social progress and understanding between the South Asian countries. But strategic distrust, India–Pakistan tensions, domestic political factors, institutional factors and lack of economic integration have prevented it from achieving its full potential. The analysis shows that these barriers are interrelated. Political mistrust is exacerbated by geopolitical competition, institutional procedures can make it hard to make collective decisions, and economic engagements in the region are limited, which means that there is less reason for continuing political cooperation. Meanwhile, there are common challenges in the South Asian region that cannot be effectively tackled using only national policies. There are opportunities for collective action with regard to climate change, public health risks, disaster management, economic connectivity, and energy security. These dynamics are explained by the theoretical perspectives explored in this paper. Neorealism emphasizes strategic competition and power disparity, and neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes how institutions can help to promote cooperation despite divergent national interests. Regionalism theory also illustrates that effective cooperation has to mirror the political and historical context of the region, and not be a replication of a single model of integration. The future of the SAARC thus hinges on how the member countries will be able to resolve political issues while maintaining avenues for tangible cooperation. Mechanisms of implementation, economic connectivity, confidence building and increased technical cooperation can help re-invigorate the relevance of the organization. Willingness to cooperate flexibly, consistent with the SAARC Charter, could also serve as a practical way to move forward in achieving common goals. Finally, the problem of SAARC is not diversity in the region but the failure to consistently translate the diversity into mutually beneficial cooperation. The unity of the region does not mean the death of the national interests and the political differences. It needs institutions and political will to constructively deal with differences. With the understanding that South Asian governments will reap the benefits of cooperation in the long run and commit to

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what can be achieved in the region, SAARC can continue to play an important part in supporting stability, resilience and shared prosperity in the region.

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