



Reinvigorating SAARC

Challenges, Opportunities, and the Road Ahead



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Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed on December 8, 1985, with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This organization aims to promote economic and regional integration among its member countries. The founding members of SAARC include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.¹ Afghanistan joined the organization later, in 2007.

SAARC was established with several original goals. Primarily, it sought to foster mutual understanding, good neighborly relations, and meaningful cooperation among South Asian countries. The organization aimed to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development within the region, ensuring that the benefits reached all citizens. Additionally, SAARC intended to strengthen collective self-reliance and contribute to mutual trust, respect, and confidence among the member states.² By addressing common problems in areas such as agriculture, rural development, science and technology, culture, and health, SAARC aimed to improve the quality of life and welfare of the people in South Asia.

Ambassador Md. Golam Sarwar, the secretary general of SAARC,^{*} speaking on May 20, 2024, during his introductory visit to Islamabad,³ emphasized the concerted efforts being made to advance cooperation within SAARC, highlighting past achievements and reaffirming the unwavering commitment of member states to the SAARC process. He stressed the pivotal role of think tanks and opinion leaders in fostering a positive narrative around regional cooperation and underscored the urgent need for revitalizing SAARC to address contemporary challenges effectively.

Relevance of SAARC

The socio-economic and geopolitical relevance of SAARC member countries is considerable, given their diverse and strategic positions on the global landscape.

A. Socio-Economic

- 1) **Population and Market Size:** SAARC countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, collectively represent nearly 24% or a quarter of the world's population. India, as the largest member, alone accounts for about 1.4 billion people. This vast population base presents a significant market for goods and services within the region.⁴
- 2) **Diverse Demographics:** The demographic diversity across SAARC countries, from the youthful populations in countries like India and Pakistan to the more developed social indices in Sri Lanka and Maldives, presents varied opportunities for social and economic development.⁵
- 3) **Emerging Economies:** Several SAARC countries, notably India and Bangladesh, are among the fastest-growing economies in the world.⁶ Their economic expansion provides momentum for regional development.
- 4) **Trade and Investment:** The region's economic integration through initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)⁷ aims to boost intra-regional trade and investment, which is currently below potential compared to other regional blocs.
- 5) **Agricultural Dominance:** Agriculture remains a backbone for many SAARC economies,⁸ providing livelihoods for a large proportion of the population. Collaborative efforts in agricultural research and development can significantly enhance food security and rural incomes.

* SAARC Secretary General, Ambassador Md. Golam Sarwar, addressed an interactive session on 'Reinvigorating SAARC' organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) in Islamabad on May 20, 2024. This policy brief is a combination of the discussions held during the session and other scholarly work.

- 6) **Rich in Natural Resources:** Countries like India, Bhutan, Pakistan, and Nepal have abundant natural resources, including minerals, forests, and water resources, which are crucial for sustainable economic development.⁹
- 7) **Educational Advancements:** Progress in education and technology sectors, particularly in India's IT and biotech industries, has the potential to drive innovation and economic transformation across the region.¹⁰
- 8) **Human Development Initiatives:** Efforts to improve health, education, and social welfare through SAARC initiatives contribute to better human development indicators, addressing poverty and inequality.

B. Geopolitical

- 1) **Geopolitical Crossroads:** SAARC countries occupy a strategically important position at the crossroads of major international trade routes, including maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, making them key players in global trade dynamics.¹¹
- 2) **Proximity to Major Powers:** The region's proximity to global powers like China and its role as a gateway to Central Asia enhance its geopolitical importance.
- 3) **Regional Security Concerns:** The region faces significant security challenges, including border disputes, terrorism, and political instability. SAARC provides a platform for dialogue and cooperation to address these issues, promoting regional stability.¹²
- 4) **Nuclear Powers:** India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed states, adding a critical dimension to regional and global security dynamics. Cooperation through SAARC can help manage tensions and promote peace.

C. Influence on Global Policies

- 1) **Climate Change:** SAARC countries are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, including rising sea levels and extreme weather events.¹³ Their collective voice in international climate negotiations is crucial for advocating for global action and support.
- 2) **Economic Policies:** Coordinated economic policies and regional trade agreements can enhance the global competitiveness of SAARC member states, influencing global trade patterns.

D. Cultural and Historical Ties

- 1) **Shared Heritage:** The cultural and historical ties among SAARC countries provide a foundation for regional cooperation and understanding, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose.
- 2) **Tourism Potential:** Rich cultural heritage and natural beauty make the region a significant tourist destination, with the potential for collaborative tourism development to boost economies.¹⁴

Key Achievements and Milestones

While SAARC has faced challenges due to political tensions and varying economic interests among its member states, its achievements and milestones demonstrate a concerted effort to promote regional cooperation and development.

- ▶ **Establishment of SAARC Regional Centers:** SAARC has established various regional centers to promote collaboration in specific areas, including the SAARC Agricultural Center (SAC) in Dhaka,¹⁵ the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Center (STAC) in Kathmandu, and the SAARC Energy Center (SEC) in Islamabad.¹⁶ These centers facilitate research, information exchange, and cooperation in their respective fields.

- ▶ **South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA):** The agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) came into effect in 2006. SAFTA aims to reduce customs duties on trade among member countries, fostering economic integration and increasing intra-regional trade.¹⁷
- ▶ **SAARC Development Fund (SDF):** Headquartered in Thimphu, Bhutan, the SAARC Development Fund was established to finance regional projects in the areas of economic, social, and infrastructure development. It supports initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation, education, health, and social welfare across member states.
- ▶ **Disaster Management Initiatives:** SAARC has been proactive in disaster management, exemplified by the creation of the SAARC Disaster Management Center (SDMC).¹⁸ This center works on enhancing regional cooperation in disaster preparedness and response, developing early warning systems, and conducting joint exercises to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters.
- ▶ **SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme:** To promote people-to-people contacts and facilitate the movement of citizens, SAARC introduced the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme.¹⁹ This scheme allows certain categories of people, such as business leaders, journalists, and sportspersons, to travel within the region without the need for a visa.
- ▶ **SAARC Social Charter:** Adopted in 2004, the SAARC Social Charter²⁰ aims to promote social development and improve the quality of life in the region. It focuses on poverty alleviation, health, education, and the empowerment of women and children, setting benchmarks for social progress.

Challenges

The effectiveness of the SAARC has been significantly impacted by bilateral conflicts, particularly the longstanding and contentious relationship between India and Pakistan.²¹ Below is an analysis of this impact:

- ▶ **Stalled Summits and Meetings:** Bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan often lead to the postponement or cancellation of SAARC summits and meetings. For instance, the 19th SAARC Summit scheduled in Islamabad in 2016 was postponed indefinitely after India and a few other member states boycotted it following the Uri attack in Indian-occupied Kashmir, which was blamed on Pakistani militants by India.²²
- ▶ **Trade Restrictions:** Despite the existence of SAFTA, trade between India and Pakistan remains minimal due to political and military tensions. Both countries have imposed various trade restrictions and tariffs, undermining the goal of economic integration within SAARC. For example, India's sensitive list for SAFTA includes many agricultural products, textiles, and clothing items, which are key exports for countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, limiting the effectiveness of the free trade agreement.²³ These challenges, including bilateral conflicts and trade restrictions, hinder the effectiveness of SAARC in promoting regional cooperation and economic integration.
- ▶ **Lost Opportunities for Economic Growth:** The economic potential of SAARC remains underutilized. Intra-regional trade among member countries is remarkably low, accounting for only about 5% of the region's total trade, compared to over 25% in ASEAN.²⁴ This low trade volume is due to high trade barriers, lack of complementary industries, and inadequate infrastructure. For instance, increased trade and economic cooperation between India and Pakistan could significantly boost regional GDP, but this potential remains largely untapped due to their bilateral conflicts.
- ▶ **Regional Security Instability:** The ongoing conflict and periodic military skirmishes between India and Pakistan create an environment of insecurity that affects the entire region. This instability discourages foreign investment and development aid, which are crucial for the socio-economic growth of SAARC countries.

- ▶ **Focus on Bilateral Rather than Regional Security:** The security agendas of India and Pakistan often focus more on countering each other rather than collaborating on regional security initiatives. This detracts from addressing other critical security challenges in the region, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking.²⁵
- ▶ **Erosion of Trust:** The persistent hostilities foster a climate of distrust that permeates SAARC's functioning. This lack of trust makes it difficult for member states to cooperate fully on initiatives that require mutual confidence and collaborative efforts. Resultantly, while SAARC has established institutions like the SAARC Disaster Management Center and the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Center, their impact has been limited due to inadequate funding and erosion of trust.²⁶
- ▶ **Polarization within SAARC:** Other member countries sometimes find themselves having to align with either India or Pakistan on various issues, leading to a polarized environment within the organization. This polarization weakens the unity and collective strength of SAARC.²⁷
- ▶ **Delayed and Inefficient Projects:** Many SAARC initiatives and projects are either delayed or not implemented effectively due to the reluctance of India and Pakistan to cooperate fully. For example, regional connectivity projects and infrastructural developments suffer from a lack of collaboration and political will.
- ▶ **Underutilization of SAARC Mechanisms:** The mechanisms and institutions created under SAARC, such as the SAARC Development Fund and various regional centers, are not utilized to their full potential because of the overarching bilateral tensions.
- ▶ **Shift in Focus to Bilateral Engagements:** Both India and Pakistan often prioritize bilateral engagements or other regional platforms like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) over SAARC, leading to reduced attention and resources for SAARC initiatives.²⁸ The BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicles Agreement also appears to be aimed at circumventing other countries and hence has faced challenges. To address these challenges and revitalize SAARC, it is necessary to focus on promoting regional cooperation, rebuilding trust among member states, and prioritizing the collective interests of the region over bilateral conflicts.
- ▶ **Poor Regional Connectivity:** Poor connectivity between SAARC countries, spanning road, rail, air, and sea transportation, severely impedes regional integration and economic development.²⁹ For instance, inadequate road and rail links between India, Bangladesh, and Nepal not only limit trade flow but also escalate transportation costs, hindering the movement of goods and people. The lack of efficient border infrastructure at Nepal's border with India disrupts trade and economic activities due to logistical challenges and frequent border closures. Furthermore, limited sea transportation infrastructure affects maritime trade, impacting countries like Sri Lanka and Maldives, which heavily rely on sea routes for commerce. Additionally, landlocked countries such as Afghanistan and Bhutan face significant challenges due to their dependency on neighboring countries for access to ports and international markets. These examples underscore how deficient connectivity across various modes of transportation undermines efforts to foster economic cooperation and integration within the SAARC region, stifling its overall development potential. To address these challenges and unlock the full potential of SAARC, it is crucial to prioritize regional cooperation over bilateral conflicts.
- ▶ **Lack of Strong Institutional Framework:** SAARC faces several organizational and structural weaknesses that hinder its effectiveness in promoting regional cooperation and development. Here are some key weaknesses with examples:
 - (1) **Weak Secretariat:** The SAARC Secretariat, based in Kathmandu, Nepal, has limited authority and resources to implement decisions and policies effectively.³⁰ It acts more as a coordinator than a decision-making body, lacking the power to enforce compliance among

member states. The Secretariat's limited capacity has hindered the implementation of the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) and other regional initiatives, which require robust monitoring and coordination.³¹

- (2) **Slow Adaptation to Global Changes:** SAARC has been slow to adapt to global economic changes, technological advancements, and emerging issues such as climate change and the digital economy. The region's response to climate change has been fragmented, despite being highly vulnerable to its impacts. SAARC's environmental initiatives lack the urgency and coordination needed to address this critical issue effectively.³²

Opportunities for Revitalization

Strengthening Political Will

Fostering political commitment and trust among SAARC member states is crucial for enhancing cooperation and achieving the organization's objectives. Here are some ways to accomplish this:

- ▶ **Regular High-Level Dialogue:** Convening annual summits serves as a pivotal platform for leaders from member states to engage directly on regional matters. These gatherings foster personal relationships and deepen understanding among leaders through regular interactions. For instance, the historic handshake between President Musharraf of Pakistan and Indian Premier Vajpayee during a SAARC summit in Nepal underscored the potential for diplomatic breakthroughs facilitated by such meetings.³³ Such summits are essential for addressing pressing regional challenges and seizing opportunities, enabling leaders to collectively prioritize issues and forge consensus on shared objectives.
- ▶ **Confidence-Building Measures:** Confidence-building measures (CBMs), Track II diplomacy, and cultural and sports exchanges play indispensable roles in nurturing trust and confidence among nations within the SAARC region.³⁴ These initiatives provide avenues for informal dialogue and engagement, fostering understanding and cooperation even in times of heightened tensions. For example, Track II diplomacy initiatives, which involve non-governmental actors such as academics, journalists, and civil society representatives, have been instrumental in facilitating dialogue and generating creative solutions to contentious issues. Additionally, cultural and sports exchanges serve as powerful tools for promoting people-to-people contacts and fostering mutual respect and appreciation for diverse cultures. Instances like joint cricket matches between India and Pakistan or cultural festivals showcasing the shared heritage of SAARC nations serve to bridge divides and build bridges of understanding. By promoting such interactions, CBMs, Track II diplomacy, and cultural and sports exchanges contribute significantly to building trust and confidence, laying the foundation for sustainable peace and cooperation in the region.³⁵

Economic Integration and Cooperation

- ▶ **Implementing SAFTA Fully and Reducing Trade Barriers:** Implementing SAFTA fully and effectively can enhance economic integration and foster mutual economic interests among member states. Reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers can boost intra-regional trade and investment, leading to shared prosperity.³⁶
- ▶ **Promoting Joint Ventures:** Encouraging joint ventures and cross-border investments in key sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and technology can create economic interdependencies, incentivizing member states to cooperate and resolve disputes peacefully.

Establishing Mediation Mechanisms

Creating formal mediation mechanisms within SAARC can facilitate a peaceful resolution of disputes between member states. Mediation by neutral third parties or regional organizations can help de-escalate tensions and build confidence. Leveraging existing regional platforms such as the SAARC Arbitration

Council can provide member states with alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, reducing reliance on bilateral negotiations.

Capacity Building and Technical Cooperation

Implementing technical assistance programs and capacity-building initiatives can enhance the capabilities of member states in various sectors, including governance, public administration, and disaster management. Sharing best practices and lessons learned fosters collaboration and mutual trust.

Engaging Civil Society and Youth

Involving youth in SAARC activities through exchange programs, leadership training, and youth forums cultivates a profound sense of ownership and belonging among the future leaders of the region. For instance, initiatives like the SAARC Youth Exchange Program³⁷ provide young people with opportunities to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and collaborative projects, fostering enduring friendships and understanding across borders. Empowering youth to actively participate in regional development initiatives not only harnesses their innovative ideas and energy but also instills in them a sense of responsibility toward shaping the future of South Asia. Similarly, engaging civil society organizations in SAARC's decision-making processes, such as through consultative meetings and policy dialogues, amplifies the voices of diverse stakeholders. For example, organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of Civil Society (SAARC CSO) play pivotal roles in advocating for the inclusion of marginalized communities and promoting grassroots perspectives in regional policies. By embracing the insights and contributions of both youth and civil society, SAARC can enhance transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, thus fostering greater trust and cooperation among member states.

Institutional Reforms to Improve SAARC's Organizational Structure and Decision-Making Processes

- ▶ **Strengthening the Secretariat:** Empowering the SAARC Secretariat with enhanced authority and resources can effectively facilitate the implementation of decisions and policies endorsed by member states. This would entail granting greater autonomy in managing budgets, staffing, and overseeing project implementation processes. Bolstering the Secretariat's capacity for monitoring and evaluating the progress of SAARC initiatives, including the SAARC Development Goals, would ensure heightened accountability and efficacy. For example, allocating additional resources for advanced data collection systems and expert evaluation teams can enable the Secretariat to conduct thorough assessments and provide timely feedback on the performance of various regional programs. Such measures not only reinforce transparency but also foster confidence among member states in the Secretariat's ability to drive tangible progress and positive change across South Asia. Likewise, building strong relationships and partnerships with international organizations like the UN, World Bank, ADB, SCO, BRICS, etc., and other regional bodies can also enhance the effectiveness of the SAARC Secretariat.
- ▶ **Improving Decision-Making Processes:** Streamlining procedures within SAARC is essential for expediting consensus-building and decision-making, especially on non-controversial issues. This can be achieved by simplifying decision-making processes and establishing clear timelines and deadlines for reaching consensus on agenda items during meetings. Additionally, the introduction of a system of majority voting for certain decisions within SAARC, while still respecting the principle of consensus for critical matters affecting the organization's mandate or core principles, can enhance efficiency and effectiveness in addressing regional challenges. Such reforms will enable SAARC to respond more swiftly to emerging issues and capitalize on opportunities for collaboration and progress across member states.
- ▶ **Implementing a Performance Review Mechanism:** To enhance accountability and effectiveness within SAARC, it is imperative to develop clear performance indicators and benchmarks to assess the impact of its programs and initiatives. Regular evaluations and reviews should be conducted to measure progress against these targets and identify areas requiring

improvement. Additionally, implementing a peer review mechanism among member states can foster mutual accountability and facilitate peer learning. Through this mechanism, member states can evaluate each other's performance in fulfilling SAARC commitments and obligations, promoting transparency, and encouraging adherence to shared goals and principles.

Potential for New Mechanisms or Bodies Within SAARC to Address Contemporary Challenges

Creating new mechanisms or bodies within SAARC can address contemporary challenges and enhance the organization's effectiveness in promoting regional cooperation and development. Here are some potential areas where new mechanisms or bodies could be established:

A. Regional Health Cooperation Mechanism

▼ Purpose:

- **Pandemic Preparedness:** Establish a regional mechanism within SAARC to coordinate responses to health emergencies, including pandemics, epidemics, and public health crises.
- **Healthcare Infrastructure:** Facilitate cooperation among member states in strengthening healthcare systems, capacity-building, and sharing medical resources and expertise.

▼ Functions:

- **Early Warning Systems:** Develop early warning systems for disease outbreaks and health emergencies, enabling timely response and containment measures.
- **Resource Mobilization:** Pool financial resources and technical expertise to support joint research, vaccine development, and procurement of medical supplies.
- **Capacity Building:** Provide training programs and technical assistance to healthcare professionals and institutions in member states to enhance preparedness and response capabilities.

B. Regional Climate Change Adaptation Center

▼ Purpose:

- **Climate Resilience:** Establish a center within SAARC to address the impacts of climate change and promote adaptation measures in vulnerable regions.
- **Natural Disaster Management:** Coordinate efforts to mitigate the effects of extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and cyclones, through early warning systems, disaster preparedness, and risk reduction strategies.

▼ Functions:

- **Data Sharing and Analysis:** Collect and analyze climate data to assess regional vulnerabilities and develop evidence-based adaptation strategies.
- **Technology Transfer:** Facilitate the transfer of climate-resilient technologies and best practices among member states to build adaptive capacity and promote sustainable development.
- **Capacity Building:** Offer training programs and technical assistance to policymakers, local communities, and relevant stakeholders on climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.

C. SAARC Youth Council

▼ Purpose:

- **Youth Empowerment:** Establish a youth council within SAARC to promote the participation of young people in regional decision-making and development initiatives.

- **Social Cohesion:** Foster cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and solidarity among youth from diverse backgrounds and communities within the region.

▼ **Functions:**

- **Youth Engagement:** Organize youth forums, conferences, and leadership training programs to empower young people to contribute to regional integration, peace-building, and sustainable development.
- **Youth Exchange Programs:** Facilitate exchanges and volunteer opportunities for youth across SAARC member states, promoting cultural exchange, mutual learning, and friendship.
- **Youth-led Initiatives:** Support youth-led projects and social enterprises that address common challenges facing the region, such as education, employment, environmental conservation, and social justice.

D. SAARC Women's Commission

▼ **Purpose:**

- **Gender Justice:** Establish a commission within SAARC to promote gender justice, women's empowerment, and the advancement of women's rights across the region.
- **Combatting Gender-Based Violence:** Address issues related to gender-based violence, discrimination, and barriers to women's participation in political, economic, and social spheres.

▼ **Functions:**

- **Policy Advocacy:** Advocate for gender-responsive policies and legislation that promote women's rights, including access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation.
- **Capacity Building:** Provide training and support to women leaders, activists, and grassroots organizations to strengthen their advocacy skills, leadership capacity, and networks.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Conduct research and data collection on gender issues to inform evidence-based policymaking and monitor progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

E. SAARC Maritime Cooperation Mechanism

▼ **Purpose:**

- **Enhance Maritime Security:** Promote cooperation among SAARC member states to address maritime security threats, including piracy, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism, and smuggling.
- **Facilitate Trade and Connectivity:** Foster collaboration on maritime trade facilitation, port infrastructure development, and connectivity initiatives to enhance regional trade and economic integration.
- **Safeguard Marine Environment:** Coordinate efforts to protect and conserve the marine environment, including marine biodiversity, ecosystems, and coastal areas, through sustainable management practices and pollution control measures.

▼ **Functions:**

• **Maritime Security Coordination:**

- Establish a platform for information sharing, intelligence cooperation, and joint maritime patrols to combat piracy, smuggling, and other transnational crimes.
- Conduct capacity-building programs and joint exercises to enhance maritime law enforcement capabilities and maritime domain awareness among member states.

• **Trade and Connectivity Promotion:**

- Facilitate dialogue and cooperation on maritime infrastructure development, including ports, shipping lanes, and multimodal transport corridors, to improve connectivity and trade efficiency.
- Harmonize customs procedures, port regulations, and maritime transport policies to reduce trade barriers and streamline cross-border trade within the region.

• **Marine Environmental Protection:**

- Develop regional strategies and action plans to address marine pollution, plastic waste management, and climate change impacts on coastal areas and marine ecosystems.
- Promote sustainable fisheries management practices, including the conservation of fish stocks, reduction of bycatch, and promotion of responsible fishing practices.

• **Search and Rescue Coordination:**

- Establish protocols and mechanisms for coordinated search and rescue operations in maritime emergencies, including natural disasters, maritime accidents, and distress situations.
- Conduct joint training exercises and capacity-building workshops to enhance search and rescue capabilities and interoperability among maritime agencies.

• **Scientific Research and Data Sharing:**

- Facilitate collaboration on marine scientific research, oceanographic studies, and data sharing to improve understanding of marine ecosystems, climate patterns, and natural resource management.
- Establish a regional database or information-sharing platform to exchange data, research findings, and best practices related to maritime issues among member states.

The Road Ahead

Strategic Vision

Developing a long-term strategic vision for SAARC entails setting realistic and achievable goals that address the region's key challenges and opportunities while fostering cooperation, integration, and sustainable development. Below is an outline of such a vision:

“To build a prosperous, peaceful, and integrated South Asia, where all member states collaborate effectively to address common challenges, promote inclusive growth, and enhance the well-being of our people.”

Review of Strategic Goals

• **Economic Integration and Trade Facilitation:**

- Implement and strengthen SAFTA to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers to intra-regional trade.

- Develop regional infrastructure, including transportation networks, energy grids, and digital connectivity, to enhance connectivity and trade facilitation.
- Institute mechanism within SAARC, aimed at facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor.
- **Regional Connectivity and Infrastructure Development:**
 - Promote cross-border connectivity initiatives, such as transport corridors, energy pipelines, and telecommunications networks, to foster economic integration and development.
 - Enhance cooperation on energy security, renewable energy development, and cross-border energy trade to ensure sustainable energy access and resilience.
- **Peace, Security, and Conflict Mitigation:**
 - Establish mechanisms for preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, and resolution to address inter-state disputes and promote regional stability.
 - Strengthen cooperation on counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and border security to combat transnational threats and ensure the safety and security of the region.
- **Sustainable Development and Environmental Conservation:**
 - Adopt a regional approach to sustainable development, incorporating principles of environmental conservation, climate resilience, and inclusive growth.
 - Promote sustainable agriculture practices, water resource management, and biodiversity conservation to address environmental challenges and enhance resilience to climate change.
- **Social Development and Inclusive Growth:**
 - Invest in human capital development, including education, healthcare, and skill training, to empower youth, women, and marginalized communities.
 - Promote social inclusion, gender equality, and social protection measures to reduce poverty, inequality, and social exclusion across the region.
- **People-to-People Contacts and Cultural Exchange:**
 - Facilitate visa liberalization, tourism promotion, and cultural exchanges to enhance mutual understanding, friendship, and cooperation among the people of South Asia.
 - Foster academic, scientific, sports, and technological collaboration to harness the region's intellectual capital and promote innovation and knowledge sharing.

Potential Benefits of a Reinvigorated SAARC for Regional and Global Stability

A reinvigorated SAARC has the potential to generate significant benefits for both regional and global stability by fostering cooperation, addressing common challenges, and promoting inclusive growth.

SAARC holds the potential to play a pivotal role in fostering regional peace and stability through dialogue, mediation, and conflict resolution among member states, thereby reducing tensions and averting conflicts. By promoting mutual understanding and trust-building measures, it can cultivate a culture of peace and cooperation among neighboring countries. Moreover, bolstering cooperation on low-spectrum security issues like counter-terrorism, border security, and maritime security can fortify the regional security architecture, thwart transnational threats, and combat cross-border crime and illicit activities.

On the front of economic integration and development, SAARC can act as a facilitator for intra-regional trade and investment, leveraging initiatives like SAFTA to diminish trade barriers and foster economic



collaboration. By capitalizing on the region's economic potential and market size, it can attract foreign investment, stimulate economic growth, and generate employment opportunities, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation and overall prosperity.

Collaborative efforts on infrastructure projects such as transportation networks, energy pipelines, and digital connectivity can further enhance connectivity, facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people, and unlock the region's growth potential.

Environmental sustainability remains a key focus, with SAARC poised to promote regional cooperation on climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, sustainable agriculture practices, and disaster risk reduction. By coordinating actions to address environmental challenges like air and water pollution, deforestation, and natural resource depletion, SAARC can bolster climate resilience and safeguard fragile ecosystems.

Additionally, SAARC can support member states in investing in human capital development, including education, healthcare, and skill training, to empower youth, women, and marginalized communities, thereby promoting social inclusion, gender equality, and sustainable development.

Finally, by revitalizing its diplomatic engagement with global partners, including neighboring regions, major powers, and international organizations, SAARC can amplify its influence on global issues, advocate for multilateralism, and contribute to forging a more stable and prosperous world.

In conclusion, despite facing formidable challenges, SAARC holds immense potential to significantly contribute to regional and global stability through intensified cooperation, integration, and sustainable development. By leveraging promising initiatives and nurturing political commitment, SAARC can actualize its vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and integrated South Asia. The challenges encountered by SAARC, including political tensions, bilateral conflicts like the India-Pakistan dispute, economic disparities, trade barriers, and organizational deficiencies, have impeded regional collaboration, economic integration, and progress toward shared objectives.

However, a revitalized SAARC has the capacity to foster regional peace, stability, and economic advancement through enhanced cooperation, streamlined trade processes, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. By addressing common challenges such as economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and social injustices, SAARC can make significant contributions to regional and global stability. Key initiatives like SAFTA, SAARC Development Goals, SAARC Arbitration Council, regional centers, and social charter exhibit promise in tackling core issues, spanning economic integration, sustainable development, dispute resolution, technical support, and social welfare, thereby bolstering regional cooperation and advancement.

A strategic vision for SAARC should prioritize attainable goals such as economic integration, infrastructure development, peace-building, environmental sustainability, social progress, and global partnerships. Implementation strategies should emphasize institutional fortification, capacity enhancement, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the effective delivery of SAARC's objectives.

Call to Action

To encourage policymakers, scholars, and the public to engage in dialogue and actions that support SAARC's revitalization, a multifaceted approach is needed. Below is a call to action with strategies for each group:

A. Policymakers

- **Promote Political Will**
 - Advocate for renewed commitment to SAARC's objectives and principles among policymakers at the national and regional levels through high-level summits, ministerial meetings, and diplomatic engagements.

- Encourage dialogue and collaboration on SAARC-related issues through dedicated sessions at regional forums such as the SAARC Summit, SAARC Ministerial Council meetings, and regional policy advisory bodies like institutes on regional studies.
 - **Allocate Resources**
 - Allocate financial and human resources to support SAARC initiatives, projects, and institutional strengthening efforts through national budget allocations and donor conferences convened by SAARC member states.
 - Prioritize SAARC-related activities in national development agendas and budgets, ensuring that funding is earmarked for regional cooperation projects and capacity-building initiatives.
 - **Facilitate Cooperation**
 - Foster cooperation among relevant government agencies, ministries, and departments to facilitate the implementation of SAARC agreements and initiatives through inter-ministerial committees and working groups.
 - Support the establishment of national coordination mechanisms for SAARC-related activities, providing a platform for regular dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders.
- B. Scholars and Experts**
- **Conduct Research**
 - Conduct research on SAARC-related topics, including regional cooperation, economic integration, conflict resolution, and social development, and disseminate findings through academic conferences such as the SAARC Research Conference on Regional Integration and Development.
 - Publish academic articles, policy papers, and research reports in peer-reviewed journals and online platforms to contribute to the body of knowledge on SAARC issues.
 - **Foster Dialogue**
 - Organize conferences, seminars, and workshops on SAARC-related issues, bringing together scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors for dialogue and knowledge-sharing. Examples include the SAARC International Conference on Conflict Resolution and the SAARC Workshop on Sustainable Development Goals.
 - Establish academic networks and research consortia focused on SAARC studies, providing a platform for interdisciplinary collaboration and research exchange through online forums and research hubs.
 - **Provide Policy Advice**
 - Offer policy advice and technical assistance to governments, international organizations, and civil society groups on SAARC-related matters through policy briefings, expert consultations, and advisory services.
 - Engage in policy advocacy efforts through participation in policy forums, such as the SAARC Policy Dialogue Forum, advocating for reforms and initiatives that support SAARC's revitalization and effectiveness.
 - **Public Engagement/Awareness**
 - Raise public awareness about SAARC's objectives, achievements, and potential benefits through media campaigns, public events, and educational programs, including lectures and film screenings.

- Highlight success stories and best practices of regional cooperation within SAARC through social media campaigns, storytelling initiatives, and online platforms dedicated to promoting SAARC’s goals and activities.
- **Mobilize Civil Society**
 - Mobilize civil society organizations, community groups, and youth networks to advocate for SAARC’s revitalization and greater public participation in regional cooperation efforts through grassroots campaigns and mobilization drives.
 - Organize public forums, town hall meetings, and community dialogues on SAARC-related issues, providing opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns, ideas, and recommendations for regional cooperation.
- **Foster People-to-People Contacts**
 - Promote cultural exchanges, sports events, youth forums, and educational programs to foster people-to-people contacts and solidarity among the citizens of SAARC member states through initiatives such as the SAARC Cultural Festival and the SAARC Youth Summit.
 - Facilitate travel, tourism, and visa liberalization to encourage greater interaction and understanding between individuals and communities across the region, supported by campaigns and advocacy efforts promoting regional connectivity and mobility.

Notes

- ¹ “Charter Day Messages,” SAARC, January 1, 2023, <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/media-centre/charter-day-messages>
- ² SAARC, December 4, 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131216014912/http://saarc-sec.org/>
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