

Introduction to SAARC

SAARC, or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, is an economic and political organization of eight countries located in South Asia. It was established in 1985 to promote regional cooperation and integration among the nations of this diverse and vibrant region.

 **by Prof. Rupali Aggarwal**

Member countries of SAARC

1. Afghanistan
2. Bangladesh
3. Bhutan
4. India
5. Maldives
6. Nepal
7. Pakistan
8. Sri Lanka

History and formation of SAARC

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1980s: Establishing Regional Cooperation

The idea for SAARC originated in the 1980s when the Presidents of Bangladesh and Bhutan proposed greater regional cooperation among the nations of South Asia.

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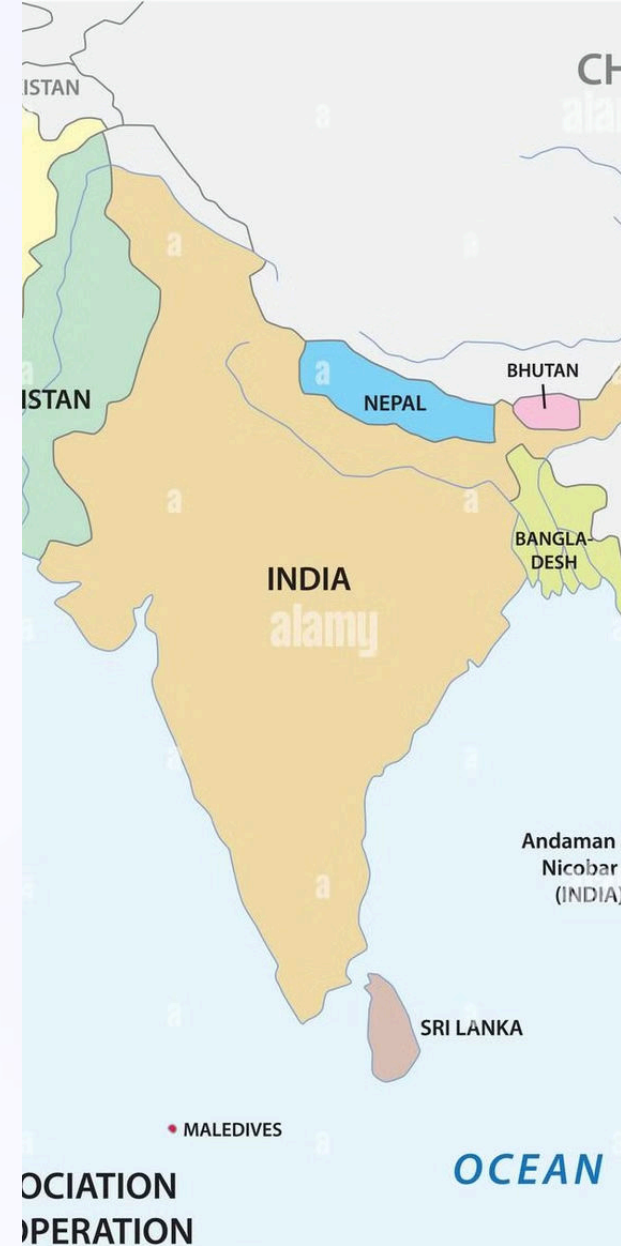
1985: SAARC Formally Established

SAARC was formally established on December 8, 1985, when the leaders of seven South Asian nations signed the SAARC Charter in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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Early Years: Building Foundations

In its early years, SAARC focused on laying the groundwork for regional cooperation, with the first SAARC Summit held in 1986 in Dhaka.



Objectives and areas of cooperation

1. Promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and improve their quality of life.
2. Accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region.
3. Provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potential.
4. Strengthen cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, finance, energy, environment, agriculture, and infrastructure development.
5. Collaborate on issues of common concern like poverty alleviation, natural disasters, and public health.
6. Foster people-to-people contacts and strengthen regional identity through cultural exchanges and tourism.



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SAARC Summits and their significance

- 1 Regular Summits**

SAARC holds an annual summit of its member states, providing a platform for heads of state to discuss regional issues and chart the future course of cooperation.
- 2 Milestone Summits**

Landmark summits, such as the 10th in Colombo (1998) and the 15th in Colombo (2008), have set ambitious goals for economic integration and people-to-people connectivity.
- 3 Significance**

The SAARC Summits have cemented regional solidarity, fostered dialogue, and led to the establishment of important institutions and agreements to drive South Asian integration.

SAARC Secretariat and its role

The **SAARC Secretariat** serves as the administrative and coordinating body for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Headquartered in [Kathmandu, Nepal](#), the Secretariat plays a crucial role in facilitating cooperation and integration among the member states.

Led by the *Secretary-General*, the Secretariat is responsible for organizing **SAARC Summits**, coordinating various [areas of cooperation](#), and implementing the decisions made by the SAARC member states. It also serves as a hub for research, data analysis, and knowledge-sharing on regional issues.

Challenges and Criticisms of SAARC

Political Tensions

The longstanding rivalry between India and Pakistan has often hindered SAARC's efforts to foster deeper regional cooperation and integration. Bilateral disputes have undermined the organization's ability to achieve its full potential.

Lack of Implementation

While SAARC has ambitious goals, member states have struggled to effectively implement the agreements and initiatives proposed at the regional level. This has led to criticism over the organization's slow progress and limited impact.

Economic Disparities

The significant economic and developmental gaps between SAARC member states have made it challenging to align interests and priorities. Uneven economic growth has contributed to asymmetries that complicate regional cooperation.

Overlapping Memberships

Many SAARC members also belong to other regional organizations, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which can create competing priorities and coordination difficulties.

SAARC and Regional Integration

SAARC plays a crucial role in fostering regional integration among the nations of South Asia. By promoting cooperation in areas like trade, infrastructure, and people-to-people connectivity, the organization aims to harness the vast economic potential of this diverse and dynamic region.

However, realizing the vision of a truly integrated South Asia has been challenging, requiring member states to overcome political tensions, historical rivalries, and economic disparities that have hindered progress. Strengthening institutional mechanisms and deepening economic ties remain key priorities for SAARC to achieve its long-term goals.



S A A R
SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION



SAARC and its relation with other regional organizations



SAARC and BIMSTEC

SAARC overlaps with BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), which includes some SAARC members as well as other nations in the Bay of Bengal region. The two organizations collaborate on shared priorities like connectivity and disaster management.



SAARC and SCO

SAARC has established ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance. They collaborate on issues like counter-terrorism and regional stability, though tensions between India and Pakistan complicate the relationship.



SAARC and ASEAN

While SAARC and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) are distinct regional organizations, they have explored areas of cooperation, such as trade, tourism, and disaster management. Coordination between the two blocs could strengthen economic and cultural ties across the broader Asian region.

Future Prospects and Way Forward for SAARC

1 Strengthening Regional Integration

SAARC must renew its commitment to regional integration by overcoming political tensions, improving implementation of agreements, and addressing economic disparities among member states.

3 Promoting Economic Cooperation

Deepening trade and investment ties, harmonizing policies, and collaborating on emerging sectors like renewable energy and technology can unlock the region's vast economic potential.

2 Enhancing Connectivity

Investing in cross-border infrastructure, transportation networks, and digital connectivity will be crucial to facilitate the seamless flow of goods, services, and people across South Asia.

4 Fostering People-to-People Ties

Expanding cultural exchanges, tourism, and educational partnerships will help build stronger regional identity and community among the diverse peoples of South Asia.