

# SAARC - HIGHWAY TO INDIA'S MARKET INTERNATIONAL STANDING

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## ABSTRACT

*SAARC, created in 1985, has had limited influence in boosting regional cooperation when compared to similar other regional alliances like the European Union, African Union (AU), and ASEAN etc. The paper seeks to assess the present state of India's relations with its neighbours including China and other global powers, identify the contours of re-orientation and formulate a strategy to enhance SAARC's relevance and use it as a fulcrum to enhance India's international standing. An informative approach has been applied to establish the present state of bilateral relations with the neighbours by evaluating several thesis, semi-structured articles, reports etc. The data augmenting the areas of discontentment / concerns amongst the member nations of SAARC including China, West Asia, South-East Asia and QUAD was gathered, analysed and contours of re-orientation defined, which require to be addressed as part of the reset strategy. SAARC, since its inception and consequent resurgence has primarily been taken hostage by the age-old seeds of continued conflicts and disagreements between the member nations, especially India and Pakistan, the two South Asian Goliaths. India needs to act swiftly and tacitly, examine renewing bonds between India with Pakistan and restoring normalcy, through negotiations, dialogues and Soft Power, boost Infrastructure Development, undertake Economic Revival, Health Sector and Food Security. Simultaneously, India must keep other options like ASEAN, QUAD, BBIN, BIMSTEC, BRICS, etc open, to enhance its stature and use as a springboard for its resurgence. The findings indicate that SAARC members especially India, as the Big Brother need to take pro-active stance with evolving, alternative, out of the box and innovative steps, may be inside and outside SAARC Charter, to highlight geo-strategic importance of SAARC nations and further enhance its international standing.*

**Keywords:** Relational Dynamics, Relationship Challenges, Re-orientation, Reset Strategy, Global Rebalancing.

## INTRODUCTION

### India and S.A.A.R.C.: Brief Perspective

India is the world's largest multi-party democracy, with rule of law still in place. It is the fulcrum around which the South Asian Region revolves due to its geographic size, geostrategic significance, improved financial health, industrial base, massive work force, and powerful and potent armed forces. To some extent, India's ambitions for regional leadership and supremacy have been realised. Some describe India as "Big Brother Bully Small Neighbors" because of its aggressive nature (Mearshimer, 2001).

South Asia, with 1.7 billion inhabitants, makes up more than a quarter of the world's population. Geo-politically, the South Asian Region serves as a gateway to the Middle East and South-East Asia. South Asia has an abundance of natural resources, human resources, and low-cost raw materials. It is the leading supplier of oil, gas, copper, manganese, gold, rubber, tea, rice,

and jute due to its large pool of human resources and cheap labour and manufacturing capacity. This attracts investors from all over the world looking for business opportunities in the industrial and service sectors, as they anticipate huge profits.

West Asia and South Asia, due to inter-connected socio-economic and political differences are deemed as the world's most complex and dangerous areas (Gill, 2016). The intertwined geographical connectivity and shared historical, social, cultural, ethnic and linguistic bonds between the population of neighboring nation states was the germination of an idea and the success of the EU and ASEAN inspired late Bangladesh President General Zia Ur Rahman to form an 'ASEAN-like' regional organisation in South Asia in the late 1970s. Bangladesh's aggressive informal and semi-formal diplomacy was followed by several deliberations and iterations, and thus a regional organisation called South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was carved out of erstwhile Hindustan in 1985.

SAARC, the brainchild and initiative of Bangladesh, was created in 1985. Initially India and Pakistan were reluctant due to their own compulsions and reasons, but later joined Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives, with Afghanistan inducted as the eighth member of SAARC in 2007. Over the years, SAARC has accorded observer status to nine countries including the EU, the US, Iran, and China. SAARC with around a quarter of the world population has a gross GDP of USD 2.9 trillion. The charter of SAARC restricts, 'Exclusion of Bilateral & Contentions Issues with focus on areas of possible Cooperation'. There is no congruence on border and development issues and hence SAARC is considered the least integrated of regional co-operations. Despite various religious, cultural, and ethnical differences, the common thread for SAARC's success is 'Economic Integration'. Post economic reforms in 1991, though India was marred by terrorist activities but its commitment to SAARC increased manifold. Presently there are 30 designated areas of cooperation, six Technical Committees, four Working Groups and four Regional Centres.

Over the last 10-15 years, India's image has undergone a complete transformation, and it is now recognised as the largest economy in the region. With political stability, a vibrant human resource, a strong and vibrant economy (GDP), and the world's fourth largest military, India is now regarded as a responsible Nuclear State and a bastion of peace, capable of dealing with a variety of security challenges. With an experienced military in counter-insurgency operations, it is also one of the largest voluntary contributors to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force (UNPKF). As a result, the world powers have agreed to recognise India as the Sixth Balancer of Power. India has exploited COVID-19 pandemic as a golden opportunity to take the lead in South Asia, develop a robust multi-sectoral plan using diplomacy, work towards enhancing the security and achieve economic integration.

### **Present Dynamics: India's Relations with Neighbours and Big Powers**

SAARC, since its inception in 1985, has not made any earth-shaking impact on various aspects that define regional cooperation, i.e., development and welfare objectives (Upreti, and Upaydhay, 2012). SAARC summits debar nations to discuss bilateral issues and problems openly (Sridharan, 2008). The South Asian countries despite having close and age old geographical, cultural, ethnic and historical connections have failed to form an economic alliance to achieve the desired end state. The early resolution of border and political issues can only map / chart a way ahead for an everlasting solution to revive SAARC and make it a success. Presently, India's relations are on its lowest ebb with not only Pakistan, but also with Nepal, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. Constant pressure from China along the Tibet border further adds fuel to fire. Maldives and to an extent Bhutan and now Bangladesh are at present fond of India.

Nepal: Post India-China conflict in Jun 2020, Indo-Nepal relations have witnessed more

downs than ups. Shri K.P. Sharma Oli, Prime Minister of Nepal issued a new political map, depicting and claiming the areas of Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh of India as part of Nepal, which was rejected by India. India inaugurated a crucial 80-kilometre road connecting Lipulekh to Kailash and Mansarovar. The aim was to improve India's infrastructure along the Tibet Border, but the initiative backfired in form of large protests in Nepal and consequently strained relations. In 2015, India was alleged for interfering in the drafting of constitution of Nepal which generated bitterness for India. On the contrary, India's concern due to increased Chinese influence are genuine. Apart from Pakistan, Nepal is also an important tool in China's assertive foreign policy to expand its South Asian footprint. China is extending multiple aids and offering acquisitions to be a part of Nepal's economic growth.

**Bangladesh:** Indo-Bangladesh relations, despite having several positives like resolution of long pending boundary issue, attendance by PM Narendra Modi on the Golden Jubilee of the Independence of Bangladesh which coincides with India's victory over Pakistan in 1971, economic turnaround and dependency, is still facing difficulties on some fronts. Biggest of them is migrant issue. India also perceives a likely threat from Pakistani ISI trained over ground workers & radical elements, presently dormant in Bangladesh but likely to be activated to trigger internal disturbance in West Bengal and North-Eastern Region of India.

**Sri Lanka:** The pro-Chinese stance of Rajapaksa government in Sri Lanka compelled Sri Lanka to drift away from India and Japan. The recent financial and economic crisis in Sri Lanka, manifesting into a humanitarian crisis amidst COVID-19 Pandemic is likely to witness long term effects on the domestic situation in Sri Lanka. Failure by China and other global powers to reach out to Sri Lanka during crisis time has not been appreciated by the political hierarchy of Sri Lanka. India's outreach to offer a line of credit (1), supply of essential commodities, COVID-19 Vaccine Maitri and aid Sri Lankan nationals in coastal areas (2), adds to India's considerate attitude towards its smaller neighbours in the times of crisis.

**Maldives:** To counter China's growing influence in Maldives, India has granted a \$500 million economic package to assist Maldives to handle the COVID-19 crisis. Maldives, being an island nation, is dependent on improving all forms of connectivity, be it air, sea, intra-island, and telecommunications, wherein India has announced a connectivity package to include the Greater Male Connectivity Project.

**Afghanistan:** Afghanistan over the years has been the epicentre of terrorism, uncontrolled flow of drugs, illegal weapons, and human trafficking. Keeping the past track record and extremist reputation of Taliban and the mood of global and regional players in mind, the proposal to not accept the Taliban regime mooted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in September 2021 was welcomed and whole-heartedly concurred by other SAARC Nations less Pakistan. Such internal divisions between the member nations have been an impediment in the progress of SAARC as a regional association on the lines like EU, AU or ASEAN.

**Pakistan:** With current account deficit rising exponentially, Pakistan has taken huge loans from China, UAE and Saudi Arabia and has sought additional time from IMF to defer the loan till Pakistan can take suitable steps to revive its economy. Overall, Pakistan is in deep trouble. Over the past ten years plus, for obvious strategic reasons, Pakistan has been germinating the seeds and strongly recommending the inclusion of China in SAARC. However, with well-defined logic and support of majority of SAARC nations, the proposal mooted by Pakistan was rejected on the grounds that strong geographical, political, cultural, linguistic, and demographic similarities of SAARC date back to the ancient times, of which China was a stranger. Hence, China has no logical claim to ever being a South Asian nation.

**Bhutan:** Bhutan, one of the few carbon-negative countries, has been India's long outstanding partner since 1949. The Governments of India and Bhutan signed the 'Treaty of Perpetual Peace

and Friendship' agreement on 8 August 1949. This treaty defined rules for cooperation in external affairs, free trade and commerce, defence purchases and justice. This treaty was followed by the 'India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty' in 2007, where Bhutan and India re-negotiated the terms, wherein by 2021, India agreed to import 10,000 megawatts of electricity from Bhutan and permit Bhutanese trade with other countries using Indian trade infrastructure. But the installed hydropower capacity (as of 2019) is still 2326 MW.

China: Recently, India and China have been engaged in multiple clashes along the LAC, despite the multiple agreements including a code of conduct to maintain peace. China has undertaken infrastructure projects all along the LAC including establishing several villages and construction of roads, airbases, and railway lines. Mature handling in form of continued dialogue has resulted in temporary disengagement along both the sides and eased some tension. Economically, China's capacity to make large investments and execute the development projects at an unprecedented pace is unchallenged (Carnegie India, 2021). China's positive approach and stance makes it the number one choice for countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka to engage in trade talks and bilateral agreements. China is one of the important arms exporters for Bangladesh too. This certainly poses a threat to India, both from the land and sea. China uses its exclusive veto power against India in UN to stall resolution of all boundary disputes and all issues concerning India and Pakistan are voted in favour of Pakistan.

Myanmar: Myanmar shares a border of over 1600km with four states in the North-East Region with Arunachal Pradesh having the longest of 520km. India's focus on Act East Policy and geographical proximity to Myanmar have given a new lease of life to bilateral relations between India and Myanmar. The 1994 agreement between India and Myanmar formalises the border trade practices, which though being marginal, due to impediments such as poor connectivity, lack of appropriate infrastructure at the border trading points and limited financing instruments for trade and commerce, occurs primarily through the ICP and LCS in Manipur and Mizoram.

### **Contours of Re-orientation: Required or Not?**

Taking cue from regional organisations like EU, AU, ASEAN, etc, SAARC was established in 1985 as a tool to achieve regional integration. Various authors and writers have analysed that SAARC as a regional cooperation could never take-off, leave aside soar. The primary reasons quoted are, unending disputes between two Asian giants, India and Pakistan, instability in Afghanistan and ever-growing economic influence of China. In literal sense, both India and Pakistan have taken SAARC hostage. While Taliban regime attaining total control, holding of SAARC summit inclusive of Afghanistan would be extremely difficult. Expect Pakistan, no other member countries would be comfortable to share the platform with the Taliban's representatives, under the SAARC umbrella.

Questioning the Performance, Sustainability and Existence of SAARC: As per the varied Asian and global perspective, SAARC, as a regional cooperation, is under stress due to underperformance. Regionalism globally is shaken and in Asia the mere existence of regionalism is threatened. The present state of various regional organisations is unstable; Trans-Pacific Partnership is shaken, ASEAN is under pressure, RCEP is struggling, SCO spreading thin, and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation has not yet taken off. Numerous questions / doubts have been raised over not only the performance of SAARC but also its existence. The performance is below average, resulting in diminishing relevance. Some questions are, Is SAARC Relevant? Is SAARC Effective? Is It Obituary Time for SAARC? Is SAARC Sustainable? Is SAARC in Coma? SAARC, as an organisation failed to deliver on the common threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan. China will always attempt to undermine revival of SAARC and will

ensure that SAARC is dwarfed under the big banyan tree.

**Hope of Revival:** Despite the existing negativities and pitfalls, some out of the box initiatives can revive hope and make us all think, that the revival of SAARC still exists and hence it's no time to write-off SAARC. Even without conduct of SAARC Summit, the Secretariat is functioning. Planning of External Affairs Ministers on the side lines of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Meeting in Sep 2021 was a step in the right direction to break the ice. Pakistan's invitation to PM Narendra Modi in Jan 2022, to attend the SAARC Summit, physically or virtually, too has been appreciated.

**Need for Re-orientation: Must Actions by India:** There is a frequent change of geopolitics and consequent change in bilateral and multi-lateral relations. Hence, India's Neighbourhood First Policy does need a reorientation. India cannot abandon its neighbours and will need to work towards strengthening relations with neighbours, as the saying goes, 'One can choose his friends but not his neighbours.'

**Relevance of SAARC Summit:** Pakistan has displayed its keenness to host 19th SAARC Summit, with its Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi even extending an invitation to India with the option of attending the Summit virtually. India, however rejected the invitation, highlighting no material change in the situation since 2014, when the SAARC Summit was called off. As a result, there is still no mutual agreement that would allow the Summit to take place. Pakistan persists that it will invite PM Modi again for SAARC summit.

**Reasons for India to Attend Summit.** Some schools propagate that India must accept Pakistan's invite to attend the SAARC Summit and take some actions. Firstly, time is ripe for India to accept the invitation and reciprocate to have an upper hand. Secondly, Kashmir issue to take a back seat. Thirdly, India can exercise leverage to put an end to cross-border terrorism, shut down infiltration and keep the LoC quiet and demand tough action on the perpetrators of 2008 Mumbai attacks. Fourthly, the slogan 'Terror and Talks do not go Together' cannot pay dividends forever. Fifthly, India must not hold South Asia hostage and antagonise other nations but gain their trust and support. Sixthly, India must assert itself to counter China in the neighbourhood, both bilaterally as well as regionally. If Pakistan Army rules the roost, then India must engage Pakistan Army leadership, rather than engaging the puppet civilian government.

**Economic Depression - Pandemic Depression:** Warnings of negative growth projections due to pandemic are evident. An estimated 42 million people within South Asia alone have already been driven back to extreme poverty. The negative export earnings through business services, textiles, transport equipment, labour, and tourism in South Asia have been compounded by a 22% decline in remittances to South Asia mainly from West Asia and Gulf. Nationalism is visible with some countries placing export restrictions on key medical supplies including oil and gas. The focus should be on health, education, and infrastructure development, rather than military which also must be maintained as a threat - in - being.

**China's Influence or The China Factor:** As part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has made heavy investments in South Asian countries in connectivity and infrastructure projects, wherein, Pakistan has been the biggest beneficiary. This includes approximately \$65 billion on CPEC, besides other investments in SEZ and energy projects. Other South Asian countries that accepted Chinese investments are Sri Lanka and Maldives. Further China is using Covid-19 diplomacy to take several strategic initiatives vis-à-vis India's neighbours in South Asia. All this is posing a strategic challenge for India and making nations eventually fall into a debt trap.

**India's Approach:** There are two distinct schools of thought on how to deal with the problem of SAARC - one is led by India and including those who are unhappy with Pakistan sponsored terrorism, and other by those who want 'Business as Usual' approach. India needs to adopt a multi-pronged strategy, firstly to keep SAARC alive, without Islamabad Summit and

encourage sub-regional cooperation, which all perceive is doubtful; secondly to give priority to Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and India-Sri Lanka-Maldives pacts. Thirdly to strengthen BIMSTEC, a two-decade old grouping, which has not been very successful? Other aspects to be considered are, how long can SAARC Summit be put-off, if Pakistan refuses to give up and concede to Sri Lanka? Hence, India needs to act swiftly and definitively as the restraint displayed by other countries may ultimately snap and forced to tilt more towards China.

### **Re-orientation and Reset Strategy - Options for India: Promote Regional Integration**

India - Global Force in Reckoning: India's adherence to democracy has helped achieve political stability and is recognised and termed as the Sixth Balancer of Power. India needs to further strengthen its international standing.

Historically, diplomatic efforts to improve security have focussed on creating and negotiating security alliances. The tag of 'Net Provider of Security and First Responder', attached to India further enhances its image. India has pro-actively taken steps to enhance security of Indian Ocean Region such as conduct and participate in joint exercises, search and rescue operations, conduct anti-piracy patrols, operations to bring back Indians during COVID pandemic in the Indian Ocean region. Being part of QUAD as also various Asia Pacific Region alliances, India's importance is being recognised, both militarily and economically. India's participation in maritime dialogues like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Commission and ASEAN controlled associations is increasing.

India is extending its goodwill by adopting the principle of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' by undertaking developmental activities in Asia, Africa, South America and Pacific. Some of the projects undertaken in the immediate neighbourhood include construction of Parliament building in Afghanistan, Supreme Court building in Mauritius, hospitals in Mauritius, better road connectivity to Bangladesh, Myanmar through North- Eastern States, Nepal and Bhutan and similar such projects. India must continue to undertake viable and visible developmental projects to meet the aspirations of friendly states, both economically and militarily, extract goodwill and reduce the rapidly increasing dominance of China.

SAARC Strategy: India, along with other SAARC nations must formulate a SAARC Vision 2030 and Vision 2035 to commemorate 50 years of the establishment of SAARC. Overall aim should be to ensure enhanced connectivity resulting in ease of doing business. Firstly, SAARC nations must learn to think and act as well-established democracies rather than just competing with EU. Secondly, the vision must envisage free movement of people, free trade area with unified transport. Thirdly, it must entail providing ecological space with interconnected energy resources and chart out a methodology to share and converse water resources. All the countries must 'Think Big'. The SAARC nations must advertise themselves as a unified economic and commercial consortium / alliance for a better deal for the region.

Human Resource Centric Approach - Democratic Values and Freedom: Over hundreds and thousands of years, India has followed the Middle Path, which prevented India from showcasing extreme strategic and political behaviour. In India, we continue to embrace everyone with open arms under the title 'Athithi Devo Bhawa'. Similarly, India's developmental flight path has profound aspirations and desire to not only contribute to solving the problems of today but to build the world of tomorrow. Hence, it requires constant adjustments, which India shall be able to handle based on our rich traditions and values.

Strategic Autonomy (Atma Nirbhar): The proponents of Atma Nirbhar, including Prime Minister Modi and cabinet ministers for finance and law, have said that this self-reliant policy does not aim to be protectionist, exclusionist, or isolationist in nature. The concept requires efficient and robust policies that encourage equality and competitiveness. It means being self-

sustaining and self-generating. This translates to creating "wealth and values not only for ourselves but for the larger humanity". The five pillars of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' have been well-defined as economy, infrastructure, connectivity, information technology-driven systems and demography. Some people call it as a clone of 'Make in India'. The difference being that Atma Nirbhar Campaign is working on time bound deliverables.

**Neighbourhood First Policy:** India promotes its Neighbourhood First as also Act East and Think West Policy. Accordingly, India's commitment to Neighbourhood First Policy is focussed towards building a connected, integrated, secure and prosperous South Asia. Hence, India has re-oriented its approach and rearranged its resources accordingly with reliance on faster connectivity, boost infrastructure development, spruce up health infrastructure and focus on energy conservation.

**Strengthen SAFTA:** SAFTA established in 2005, if handled carefully by India, could have been a game changer for SAARC. India could lower the intra-regional trade barriers for South Asian nations, on food and trade, thereby encourage uninterrupted supply chain. India could also open new trade corridors for land-locked nations like Nepal and Bhutan.

**Boost Infrastructure & Connectivity:** Simple trade policies without trade barriers should first be implemented in the Indian states & once streamlined, these must be extended as part of extension of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. Some of these include liberal transit trade, development of supply and logistic chains, digital data exchange, single-window and digitised clearance systems for start-ups and business entrepreneurs, risk assessment and mitigation measures, providing trade lines of credit, better connectivity in form of denser road, rail and water network, smooth transit through borders, reduced transaction costs, and above all employing technology as a force multiplier. In some areas, new transport projects like railway projects with Bangladesh and Nepal, Chabahar and Sittwe Ports in Iran and Myanmar, and inland water projects with Bangladesh can help India create new transport corridors.

**Energy Grid:** South Asian Region, being rich in mineral and oil resources has immense potential of power trade amongst the neighbours. The energy grids of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar are being linked. India has invested in power projects in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Hydrocarbon pipelines can now link India with Nepal and Bangladesh.

**Food Security:** The withdrawal of US from Afghanistan in Aug 2021, the ongoing Ukraine-Russia Crisis, the omni-potent threat of China over Taliban and South China Sea and the depleting value of US dollar must motivate India to have a vision to exercise control over regional food godowns. With 70% of South Asia dependent on subsistence agriculture, India must maintain sufficient food reserves to deal with the crisis by augmenting food supply chain to the SAARC Food Bank.

**Ecological Footprint:** Can India lead South Asia by Example in 2022? India's initiative and leadership in matters of climate change and protection of biodiversity are appreciated by the world including China. At COP Summit in Glasgow in October - November 2021, India led the developing countries by promising to become carbon neutral by 2070. In the future, South Asia would want India to take a more robust stand to ensure that the developed nations deliver on their promise of climatic control.

**Lead in the Health Sector:** Apart of infrastructure development and energy conservation, health is yet another field where India can take the lead. Apart from being Atma Nirbhar in COVID vaccination, India's Vaccine Maitri Initiative, provided a platform to project itself as a potent regional power and simultaneously curb the increased Chinese influence in the region. Now, India must adopt a more aggressive approach in form of COVID diplomacy by providing additional free vaccines, free access to the markets and out of proportion support during times of emergency like cyclones, earthquakes, floods, tsunami etc. South Asia, with nearly quarter of the world population, must regularly also protect itself from the outbreak of HIV, Ebola, SARS,

H5N1 and Nipah Virus.

### **India: An International Force Multiplier**

**Futuristic Approach:** India, in its efforts to balance regional and global aspirations must find solutions to common problems. Firstly, India must grab the digital diplomatic space along with associated opportunities and vulnerabilities. Secondly, due to the COVID 19 Pandemic, the need for resilient supply chains along with digital solutions has increased manifold. India must exploit the space created space greater economic diplomacy, driven by financial might and creditability.

**COVID 19 Pandemic and Resultant Influence:** India is one of the emerging power houses of Asia and economic giant of the world who is enhancing its global footprint and presence. COVID 19 Pandemic has necessitated a wholesome approach, requiring innovative, immediate, and effective solutions, driven by both, the government and the society. During the pandemic, India acted maturely, like a true superpower and provided timely relief to one and all.

**Economic Development:** Development is like a sinusoidal wave. Hence, all economic downturns are followed by growth, which is likely to take-off after the current pandemic wanes. India's economy is growing at a steady pace. During the pandemic too, India received FDI inflows, as it displayed immense potential and growth in the start-up and innovation market. Keeping India as a fulcrum, SAARC must be revived as an intra-regional cooperation platform.

**Technological Resurgence:** Post 2005-2006, adaptation to digital technology in India is spreading like wildfire. New geo-tech regimes and arrangements are the order of the day. The digital enablers developed by India, like IndiaStack, Aadhar, UPI, etc are now being recognised the world over, primarily because of the large population it serves, thereby signifying stability. India is also taking a lead in innovative solutions in data regulation, e-commerce regulation, cyber warfare, and cyber security.

**Go-Green Initiative:** Climate change is one of the important challenges of modern time. Energy conservation is centric to India's Go Green ambition. Ignoring own development requirements, India has displayed strong commitment to climate action. India has invested big time in renewable energy as 24% of energy needs of India are met from renewable sources. India is amongst the top five acclaimed nations, adhering to Climate Change. India is the only G20 country which has achieved "2°C Compatible" targets.

**Humanitarian Approach:** Regional organisations, such as SAARC, must prioritise basic issues such as saving the lives of its members' nationals and providing them with necessities. Over 22,000 Indian students have been evacuated from war-torn cities in Ukraine by India. In addition, the Indian Embassy in Kiev and Indian Rescue Missions evacuated many Bangladeshi students as well as some Pakistani students. This clearly demonstrates that a well-meaning neighbour will provide unconditional assistance during a crisis, even if the recipient neighbour is vehemently hostile. SAARC members, especially Pakistan need to take a cue from such past and present crisis situations and learn to trust India, to revive SAARC.

**Actions to Achieve Immediate Maximum External Effect:** Though these actions may not find favour, but some actions to achieve maximum immediate effects include, opening of transit facilities between SAARC countries, visa system to be abolished, ease of exchanging currency or a common currency to be adopted, ease of movement in own transport, sharing energy resources in a conservative manner (electricity, oil, gas, water), ease of tele communication and finally enhance the scope of trade.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the difficulties in implementing the SAARC initiative, India has realigned its



approach to regional integration. Following 2014, India's policies demonstrate a lack of interest in SAARC. Instead, India has investigated other options on two fronts: first, through bilateral engagements with South Asian neighbours under the Neighbourhood First Policy, and second, through a greater emphasis on bilateral and multilateral engagements beyond South Asia. It is worth noting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi attempted to resurrect SAARC in 2014 when he invited leaders from all SAARC countries to his inauguration ceremony. In near simultaneity, at the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the importance of South Asian regional integration, which was considered contrary by advocates battling for regional cooperation.

Under the Neighbourhood First Policy, India has reached out to neighbours such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka while avoiding Pakistan. India has emphasised mutually beneficial economic engagements and humanitarian aid. This was especially evident in the last two years during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first stage of the pandemic, India supplied medical equipment and hydroxychloroquine. After developing its own COVID-19 vaccine, India prioritised vaccine supply in the region through the Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) Initiative. Though the Neighbourhood First Policy lacks a formal institutional structure, it provides India with a convenient option for manoeuvring across South Asia while ignoring its relations with Pakistan.

Outside of South Asia, India has increased its participation in organisations such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the G-20 to name a few. India also intends to broaden its outreach to South-East Asia via the Act East Policy and to Central Asia via the India-Central Asia Dialogue. Diversifying India's multilateral engagements is urgent, reflecting New Delhi's desire for greener pastures outside of South Asia to establish a prominent identity for itself on a global stage.

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