

# SAARC'S STRATEGIC RESURGENCE: IMPASSE AND OPPORTUNITIES

Anupam Agarwal, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University  
Deepak Jain, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** SAARC has been in existence for 30 years, but its influence in compared to other regional cooperation's such as the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union is lacking. This paper aims to highlight the impasse and opportunities for the strategic resurgence of SAARC to make it vibrant and effective.

**Approach:** An interpretative approach is used to ascertain the areas of non-cooperation from the analysis of semi-structured articles / thesis / reports of various writers and educators on the subject. The data pertaining to areas of non-cooperation or roadblocks amongst the member nations of SAARC was gathered, analysed and major aspects, which require to be addressed were collected.

**Findings:** The analysis support that non-cooperation primarily the age-old areas of dissension / conflicts amongst the member nations especially the two South Asian giants, India and Pakistan have been the primary roadblock in the performance of SAARC and its consequent resurgence. The pitfalls identified are Lack of Political Will, Recent Developments in Afghanistan, Frosty India-Pakistan Relations, Kashmir Dispute, Terrorism, and perceived Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia. Hence, there is no time to lose, and India needs to act fast and firm as other countries may be willing to go with 'Business as Usual', which must look into Rebuilding Bridges between India and Pakistan, utilise Soft Power accord priority to Virtual Meetings and undertake Economic Revival, simultaneously keeping other options open like BIMSTEC, QUAD, ASEAN etc.

**Research Implications:** The findings indicate the need for action on part of SAARC members to proactively undertake the activities mandated under SAARC Charter through various alternative evolving and innovative means, to ensure the relevance and importance of SAARC.

**Keywords:** Impasse, Opportunities, Non-Cooperation, Economic Integration, Relations, Revival, Resurgence.

## INTRODUCTION

### S.A.A.R.C.: At a Glance

Regionalism, as a terminology came into prominence after the Second World War, when nations realized that they need to work as "One Region" to fight against their common problems. Regionalism is a form of multinational grouping of nations functioning on common interests and goals and work together to achieve the developmental goals, which could be either security or economic prosperity. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), created in 1985, is a regional organisation of South Asian states that includes India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Afghanistan became a member of the organisation

in 2007. Over the years, SAARC has accorded observer status to nine countries including the European Union, the US, Iran, and China, making it a rather unique organisation where the number of observers outnumbers the members!

Because of inter-connected socio economic and political differences, West Asia and South Asia are the world's most complicated and dangerous areas (Gill, 2016). South Asia is home to 1.7 billion people, accounting for around 23 to 24 percent of the world's population. Geographically, one-fourth of world population live between Afghanistan and Pakistan to the West on one side and Bangladesh and India to the east on the other. Geo-politically too, South Asian Region lies to the south of the former Soviet Union, China and the Himalayas; bordered by Myanmar (Burma) to the East and Afghanistan to the West i.e. both act as gateways to South East Asia and South West Asia respectively. South Asia is the region which provides connectivity via the land routes between Europe and East Asia and the sea connectivity between the Persian Gulf and the Asia-Pacific through the Indian Ocean. Economically, it has a large pool of natural and human resources, providing cheap raw material and attracting investors from around the world. Being a resource rich region, South Asia is the source of majority of the natural resources and manufactured goods across the world, which includes oil and gas, rubber, copper, manganese, gold, cotton, tea, jute, and rice. Due to the geographical proximity and common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social, and historical bonds amongst the neighbouring states, carved out of erstwhile Hindustan, SAARC post several deliberations and iterations was created in 1985.

SAARC with more than 23 to 24 percent of the world population has a gross GDP of USD 2.9 trillion. It was the brainchild of Bangladesh with Indian and Pakistan as reluctant entrants at first. The decision was taken by consensus and not based on bilateral issues. The charter of SAARC restricts, "*Exclusion of Bilateral & Contentions Issues with focus on areas of possible Cooperation*". However, presently bilateral issues take prominence and hence it is considered the least integrated of regional co-operations, infested with several pitfalls. These could either be the baggage of 1947 partition, the size and dominating economic and social development of India, preventing other member nations to come together and contribute equally or the flawed 'Concept of Regionalism'. SAARC is not functioning effectively now does not imply it could never function in the intended way as envisioned during its formation. Despite various religious, cultural, and ethnical differences, the common thread for its success is "*Economic Integration*". India's commitment to SAARC increased post 1991 economic reforms, wherein there are 30 designated areas of cooperation, six Technical Committees, four Working Groups and four Regional Centres.

### **Importance of India's Strategic Location: South Asian Region**

India is the largest plural democracy where rule of law still reigns supreme. The geographic size, strategic location, economy, industrial base and military strength makes it the pivot in South Asian Region and simultaneously fuels India's aspirations of leadership and regional dominance, as India caters for 70% population (Human Resource) of South Asia. Some label India as hegemonistic as they consider India as "*Big Brother Bully Small Neighbours*" (Mearshimer & Alterman, 2001). In the positive sense, it may be perceived as "*India's Pride*" and "*Neighbours Envy*".

India has undergone an image transformation in the past 10-15 years with political stability, economic growth (GDP), military prowess, indigenously developed missile and space technology and labelled as responsible Nuclear State, India is now ready to handle multiple

security challenges as the bastion of peaceful co-existence. India's image on world arena has undergone a sea-change, wherein, it has contributed immensely towards climate change, multi-lateral trade in WTO and IT and is also one of the largest voluntary contributors to the UN Peace Keeping Force (UNPKF). This has compelled the forces of globalisation to recognise India and now consider India as Sixth Balancer of Power. However, doubt still exists in the minds of international community on India's ability to handle greater international responsibilities.

### **Present Status**

Promotion of development, peace, and harmony all over the world are synonym to regional co-operation. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are excellent models of regional cooperation and economic interdependence that SAARC could emulate. The hallmark has been an improvement in people's living conditions and devotion to human rights, allowing open commerce and travel.

On the contrary, the aspect of regional co-operation amongst South Asian Nations has been below average, wherein, SAARC has been unable to ride the success story of development and welfare objectives (Upreti & Upaydhay, 2012). SAARC nations do not discuss bilateral issues and problems openly during SAARC summits but resort to bilateral summits (Sridharan, 2008). The age-old historical ties amongst the eight South Asian countries of the SAARC in the field of social, economic and cultural fields have not resulted in forming an economic alliance, which can be attributed to multiple factors (Das, 1992). Close geographical, cultural, and historical similarities have also failed to assist SAARC reach the desired end state. The same could be accredited to constant environment of suspicion, tension, and disagreements amongst the member states on every proposal, however good. Unfortunately, due to constant regional power politics and conflicts in South Asia, the desired progress has been below par (Rynning, 2017). The SAARC Charter of SAARC places an embargo on the discussion of political and other major issues and is perceived as the primary cause for all the turmoil. On understanding other regional organizations, it is evident that the resolution of political issues will be a steppingstone to real improvement. Hence, to pull out SAARC from its grave and make it a success, there is a need to redesign the charter of SAARC to undertake resolution of political issues.

### **Pakistan's Support to China**

In the past decade, Pakistan has been supporting for China to be made a member of SAARC for obvious strategic reasons, and it even managed to gain support from Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives during the period when anti-India sentiment was briefly prevalent in those countries. However, India and many other SAARC neighbours have opposed this move on the grounds that SAARC is a geographic entity with close political, cultural, linguistic, culinary, and demographic homogeneity dating back to ancient times, and China has no logical claim to ever being a South Asian nation.

### **Effectiveness**

The progress and development are not in consonance with the efforts. SAARC failed to deliver on numerous issues barring a few successes in the fields of agriculture, education,

culture, and health. The achievements include Social Cohesion, Economy Trade (SAFTA in 2006), SAARC Development Fund, Integrated Programme of Action (2012), counter - terrorism, SAARC Satellite, Education, Sports, etc. No summit meetings have been held since 2014 but engagement at lower level continues. SAARC has been hampered by political friction, poor connectivity, trade protectionism and lack of resources. Intra SAARC trade and investment are way below potential in spite of SAFTA. Moreover, SAARC has a very poor record in enhancing people to people exchanges and Pakistan acts as a spoiler and client state of China within SAARC. SAARC has been insignificant in HADR contingencies and has been hampered by critical internal flaws.

### **Present Impasse**

**Lack of political will:** The continuous age-old bilateral issues amongst the South Asian countries result in political stress and disputes further stepping into insecurities and challenges to the creation of South Asian Union. The South Asian dream of people and adoption of common currency and economic policies which shall lay the foundation for free movement and ensure harmony / peace on lines like European Union may remain a dream only. *“The pro-active approach of the South Asian leaders to resolve internal and bilateral issues through peaceful negotiations would provide the much-desired springboard to implement peace, harmony and achieve economic integration through SAARC association”* (Iqbal, 2006).

### **Developments in Afghanistan**

In September 2021, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mooted the proposal of not accepting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, primarily due the past record and reputation of Taliban. SAARC Nations, being fully aware of the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, leading to uncontrolled flow of drugs, illegal weapons and human trafficking concurred to the proposal. Plagued by internal divisions between the member nations, SAARC has not become a regional association on lines like the European Union, the African union, or the ASEAN.

### **India Pakistan Relations**

The end of British rule in Asia in 1947, resulted in the division of Hindustan based on religion into two independent states, India and Pakistan, which account for a population of almost 1.5 billion (approximately one-fifth of the world population). However, for the past 75 years, India and Pakistan are engaged in a tense and hostile environment resulting into four major wars in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999. *“India and Pakistan were nuclear powers during the Kargil War in the Himalayas in 1999. (Chari et al., 2009). Again, a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 brought both countries to the verge of war”*. In November 2008, India was subjugated to another terrorist attack, which further sank the bilateral relations to its lowest ebb. After marginal improvement, deterioration in India-Pakistan relations re-commenced in July 2014 on the question of Pakistan - Hurriyat Nexus in Indo-Pakistan bilateral talks. The same was clear from the frosty body language of both the PMs, Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif at Kathmandu SAARC Summit in 2014. The existing frost melted a bit towards end of Summit when the two leaders shook hands and had one-on-one discussions. However, cross-border terrorist attacks by Pakistan, especially the one in Uri Sector of J&K on 22/23 September

2016 spoiled the relations, wherein India refused to participate in the SAARC Summit scheduled for Nov 2016 in Islamabad. The same was supported by three more countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Both Bangladesh and Afghanistan also complained of Pakistan sponsored terrorism. India however, reiterated its commitment to regional cooperation, without rejection of SAARC. Pakistan, on the other hand initially refused to endorse energy and connectivity proposals. But later Pak accepted the energy proposal but not the connectivity proposal. With CPEC on Pakistan's, Pakistan did not want to give access to India to Afghanistan. Persistent cross-border terrorism attacks, such as those in Pathankot, Jammu, Uri, and Pulwama, finally compelled India to suspend all diplomatic contacts with the motto "*Talks and Terror do not go hand in hand,*" diplomatically isolate Pakistan, and refuse to attend the SAARC Summit in Islamabad. Following that, India made multiple attempts to delegate the SAARC Summit to Sri Lanka, which Pakistan finds unacceptable. India and Pakistan blame and cast aspersions on each other for all such activities and quote a reason to continue with the frosty relations (Jabeen & Choudhry, 2013).

### **Kashmir Dispute**

Kashmir is and will continue to be the primary bone of contention between India and Pakistan, resulting into three wars in 1947-48, 1965 and 1999. The partition of India and Pakistan, on religious grounds, based on the British policy of "*Divide and Rule*", is the genesis of the problem. India continues to maintain Kashmir as an undisputed and an integral part of its territory. On the contrary, Pakistan's considers the accession of Kashmir to India by an Instrument of Accession as a forced step. Moreover, till 1990s, the superpowers like the US, the UK and China supported Pakistan's disputed stance of Kashmir, thereby tilting the scales in favour of Pakistan. For Pakistan, Kashmir remains the unfinished agenda of 1947 partition, evident from the three wars fought and lost by Pakistan. Simultaneously, Pakistan wants to counter the so-called India's hegemonic aspirations (Chari et al., 2009). "*Frosty relations, politically, diplomatically and militarily continue to threaten regional security and stability. These are constant impediments to economic and social growth and terrorise human rights and freedom. Over a period, these tensions have graduated into extremism, terrorism and provide a platform for non-state actors to destroy the human fabric*" (Kumar, 2005).

### **Terrorism**

The progress of SAARC is at a snail's pace, which has resulted in into several burning issues such as transportation, transfer of energy, trade, disaster management, terrorism and security in South Asia not being accorded priority (Lamichhane, 2016). Concerted efforts are being made at the bilateral and multilateral levels to enhance cooperation to counter terrorism. However, due to ideological differences, a common and comprehensive approach and strategy to tackle terrorism has not been evolved and the member nations share equal responsibility for the same (Jabeen & Choudhry, 2013). The political differences shall only delay the process of integration and embolden the terrorist organisations. Hence, SAARC must adopt a comprehensive and region-specific approach, wherein all acts of terrorism must be condemned and responded by a common thread.

## **Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia**

Pakistan initially rejected the proposal of creation of SAARC, a regional cooperation proposed by Bangladesh, as Pakistan was unable to digest the Indian superiority in the South Asian Region, especially when having suffered three humiliating defeats at the hand of India. Pakistan also thought that getting aligned to SAARC would dilute their hard-line stand on Kashmir. Later, Pakistan approved the SAARC plan on the promise of each member nation's equal and sovereign participation (Javaid, 2013). Over time, India has gained the support and trust of its regional neighbours by relying on soft power rather than strong might. The concept of soft power, as stated by Joseph Nye in 2005, has gained favour among nations seeking to achieve their goals by dialogue rather than force (Gill, 2016). The military and economy are two important pillars of hard power, on the contrary the soft power relies primarily on ideology, ethnicity, and culture. Soft power is regulated through people to people exchanges, track two diplomacy which attract the hearts and minds. Positive image, realistic and practical strategies contribute to enhancing country's soft power. If India is to be crowned as a leader, then India must embark and make all efforts to shed its negative image.

## **Lack of Economic Integration**

The South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) launched in 2006 has not made able to make inroads and achieve success due to continued tension and frosty relations between India and Pakistan, the two South Asian giants. Moreover, in the pre Covid 19 Pandemic times, SAARC comprised of approximately 4.21% (US \$67 Trillion) of the global economy. With the Nominal GDP of SAARC Nations being approximately US \$3.31 Trillion, it is one of the most emerging development regions in the world. However, the enormous market demand in SAARC across all the sectors to include Industry, Services like Hospitality and Information Technology, Agriculture and Health have not been met with similar thrust in regional supply and inter dependence, resulting in market exploitation by China and other global market players. The proactive Chinese approach and consequent capture of market in Pakistan and to some extent in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka due to bulk production, supply, cheaper rates and associated infrastructure development has had an adverse effect on India to establish itself economically in the South Asian Region. Pakistan's recurring economic crisis, continuation in FATF Grey List, limited financial support from Islamic and Western countries may fuel a serious humanitarian crisis in times to come. The evolving socio - economic situation in Afghanistan may also push the people of Afghanistan towards hunger, lack of medicines and resultant poverty and misery in the near future.

## **Water Dispute**

Besides the boundary and territorial dispute, several other problems amongst the member nations continue to escalate the tension in South Asia, now and then. The concept of water as a weapon and water as a cause of future regional and international conflicts cannot be undermined. The distribution of water of five rivers further aggravated the rivalry between India and Pakistan. As predicted, water may be the primary cause of intra and interstate rivalry till an effective solution is worked out (Ahmar, 1982). Hence, South Asian Nations, still undeveloped and marred by over population need to look for alternate ideas and adopt cooperative trans-boundary

water management measures to counter the perceived challenges (Mansoori, 2017), like the one evolved by India with Bangladesh.

## **SAARC: A Critical Analysis**

### **Is it Time to Write an Obituary for SAARC?**

Though no SAARC Summit has been conducted since 2014 and no Summit has been held in 2018/2019, but it is no time to write the obituary for SAARC. Even without Summit, Secretariat is functioning, and Programme Committee Meetings are being held, wherein 55 Session of Programme Committee was held on 06 July 2018. A virtual conference at the beginning of COVID 19 pandemic was initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and an External Ministers Meeting was also planned on the sidelines of SCO in Sep 2021. SAARC is in coma/ICU and the disease is known to both the patient and the doctors, but they seem reluctant to treat it. It is not the first time that Summit has been missed; only 18 summits have been in 36 years, with 10 in the first fifteen years and eight in the next 21 years. There have always been several postponements and cancellations on various counts like internal conflicts, inappropriate preparations, and bilateral differences.

### **Sustainability of the Concept of Regionalism**

If we look at SAARC in the wider Asian and global perspective, it is evident that due to varied economic interests' regionalism is under stress in Europe. Regionalism in Asia is also under flux, with Transpacific Partnership shaken, ASEAN under pressure, RCEP still struggling, SCO spreading thin and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation not yet taken off. With China's independent initiatives like BRI/OBOR, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), CPEC etc, will China let regionalism flourish, if SAARC as an effective organisation conflict with China's perceived core interests like ASEAN (dwarfed under the big banyan tree).

### **India's Approach**

There is a clear polarisation in South Asia regarding how to proceed on 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 three-prong approach, 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 but BBIN has its hiccups (on Motor Vehicle Agreement, since April 2017, as this is temporary). Thirdly to strengthen BIMSTEC, a two-decade old grouping, which has not shown much promise? 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? Pakistan will also not hesitate to get China in, more so after aggressive perusal of BRI / OBOR by China. Hence, India needs to act fast, and firm as other countries may be willing to go with '*Business as Usual*'.

### **Likely Way Ahead**

For stabilisation and transformation of South Asian Region, SAARC is very much functional, and its role is undoubtedly extremely important. If the South Asian Nations are not

united in thought and action, then the tensions with increased terrorism within the paradigm of environmental realities will place the entire region in turmoil. Thus diplomacy, peace, harmony, and coordination are extremely essential between the member nations for SAARC to counter the threats and challenges prevailing in the region.

### **Rebuilding Bridges**

SAARC, a regional cooperation, thrives on resolving all regional security issues bilaterally and South Asian Nations, must recognise the importance of regional cooperation. SAARC's goals included promoting economic growth and other types of non-military co-operation among all the South Asian nations, which would contribute to stability, prosperity, and peace in an exceedingly dangerous area. For long the security element, rather than economic and social element has dominated the South Asian Region. The virtual meeting of 15 Mar 2020 has shown that SAARC has immense potential. SAARC leaders must seize the opportunity, put egos aside and work towards regionalism based on equal opportunities. To kick start, if India and Pakistan can negotiate and resolve their age-old disputes bilaterally, by keeping the superpowers at bay, then the chances of establishing and sustaining regional cooperation would be much bright. Given South Asian Region current security dimension and economic interconnectedness, cooperative security is the greatest option for India and Pakistan's political leadership to solve conventional military and nuclear confrontation in the region (Dash, 2008).

### **Soft Power - COVID 19 Diplomacy**

It is essential for the Indian leaders to project India as the flag bearers of soft power rather than hard power. India's poor image among its neighbours necessitates a relook at the strategy dimension in order to regain the trust of regional neighbours and clear away all doubts about a growing India. COVID 19 pandemic has provided India the springboard and platform for SAARC's revival. As most countries were busy fighting within the borders, regional cooperation was nowhere on the horizon and SAARC was considered beyond revival. However, India's proactive approach spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a successful attempt to bring all the SAARC nations on a common video platform has provided a glimmer of hope. Though public health is not an asset of SAARC nations but the thought and initiative itself is commendable. Even when the global crisis looms large, India has projected itself as a leader and depicted that the SAARC spirit is alive to foster and rejuvenate regional cooperation.

### **SAARC Meeting - Physical or Virtual**

There is a need for India to re-engage at SAARC Summit level in 2022 regardless of Indo-Pak relations. Presently, Pakistan is hesitant to take the initiative to call for the SAARC meeting, on the pretext of it being turned down by India on account of Pakistan's continued acts of terror within India. However, Pakistan must take a bold initiative to call for the SAARC meeting and India, like a Big Brother must accept the proposal and spearhead using its soft power. If required, a kick start could be given by conducting a virtual meeting, much required to break the ice. The virtual engagement of SAARC nations to fight COVID 19 pandemic has been practically experienced and appreciated worldwide and seems highly workable. Similar such baby steps for virtual engagements and collaborations could be thought of in the field of public health and



medical, availability of food grains and its distribution and other such community needs of the people of the region.

### **Economic Revival**

There is a need to connect SAARC Nations, economically, geographically and culturally. The Indian outreach during Covid-19 Pandemic to offer Covid vaccines to SAARC nations including Pakistan and recent humanitarian assistance provided to Sri Lanka may act as future enablers for revival of economic and market related activities in SAARC. Further, during the present pandemic, the existing SAARC mechanism could be put to test to repair and build regional value chains. The technological expertise, surplus skilled and unskilled labour, relaxed tariffs and minimum trade barriers could be exposed to gain a strong foothold, initially in the regional and then in the global market by producing good quality cheap goods, in a highly competitive market through regional value chains. The same could be achieved in motor industry, textile industry, industrial sector, agro and fruit value chains and similar such multiple options are available. In this context, the Indian 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative and plans to become a five trillion economy in next few years needs to be used effectively to generate regional economic activity to make commodities available at competitive and cheaper rates and increased inter dependence in times to come. This is thus an ideal time and opportunity to revive the economic activity in the region. SAARC members need to trust India and should associate with 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' programme which can act as a springboard for Economic Integration and surge ahead to convert into and finally become 'Atmanirbhar SAARC'.

### **Charter of SAARC**

The charter of SAARC needs reworking to remove excessive safeguards, inclusion of "SAARC Minus" Concept and creation of mechanism for censure. Greater focus should be on Trade Facilitation, Energy Trade Connectivity, HADR Coordination, Visa Regimes and Cultural Exchanges. Overall SAARC needs better branding and visibility amongst South Asian population.

### **UNPKF**

The contribution of South Asian Nations to various UN Peace Keeping Missions is noteworthy. The sudden US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 has created a vacuum. Rather than various terrorist and extremist forces operating in Afghanistan, a joint UNPKF from the SAARC region under the UN aegis is an option to be considered. One must remember what Kautilya once said and still merits attention, '*Your immediate neighbour is your enemy, and the neighbour of your neighbour is your best friend. The readers might be aware who our neighbour is and who is neighbour of our neighbour*'.

### **Miscellaneous Implementation Mechanism**

Over the last 36 years, SAARC has created a strong network of institutions and linkages. In the beginning, India too had a strong fear of being isolated by the small neighbours i.e. '*gang up*', however due to India's mature handling of regional and international, such apprehensions proved to be false. SAARC needs to accord due priority to improve various instruments of development, such as undertaking track-two initiatives with the deep involvement of civil

society. Although the SAARC charter bans bilateral matters from being discussed at formal forums, SAARC summits offer a unique, informal window - the retreat - for leaders to meet without support and lay out the route forward. Even in the height of tensions, the psychological integration of leaders in a region beset by uncertainties, misunderstandings, and conflicts is a key strength of SAARC that must be recognised.

### **Alternative**

BIMSTEC, an alternative to SAARC is a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN. With 14 sectors of cooperation, it represents 21 percent of global population and gross GDP of USD 2.5 trillion. It also conducts Biennial Summits and has Annual Ministerial Meetings, BIMSTEC Working Group and Special Task Forces. Very little has been achieved due to lack of political will and non-functioning Secretariat until 2014, when policy reforms were undertaken to strengthen the Secretariat. BIMSTEC Energy Grid Interconnection Agreement in 2018 is promising but in absence of FTA, intra BIMSTEC Trade and Investment is well below potential. The focus is on connectivity with many ongoing Surface and Maritime Transportation Corridor Projects. The advantages BIMSTEC enjoy over SAARC are less asymmetry, more flexibility and lack of political controversy. For India, BIMSTEC is developing into cornerstone of India's strategies - Neighbourhood First, Act East and Indo-Pacific. Pro-active stance has been undertaken by India in form of meetings of NSAs to discuss traditional and non-traditional security threats. Thailand is unhappy with Indian trade barriers. The countries have trust deficit over India's ability to deliver on promises. There is a limited appetite amongst BIMSTEC countries for security cooperation other than India. Moreover, the smaller less developed countries are fearful of fully integrating economies to protect their local markets and BIMSTEC has a constant all-pervasive influence / threat of China in the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

India must maintain focus on connectivity. India must also improve its delivery mechanisms through special provisions and regular monitoring and further cooperation with Japan and include Maldives. The spotlight must be on 4Cs i.e., Connectivity, Culture, Commerce and Capability Enhancement. There is also a need for integrated policies by all the state actors in India with greater involvement of Border States of India in decision making and meetings. India must restrict military and security engagement to HADR, Counter Terrorism, TNOC and Coastal Policing. SAARC Development Fund needs to be operationalised to further strengthen the Secretariat and provide teeth to it. Certain observers speculated that if bitter foes like France and Germany were able to successfully merge on some common issues after WWII to form the European Union, there is no reason why India and Pakistan cannot do the same. The SAARC region has the potential to bring nations together. Nelson Mandela said - 'If you want to make peace with your adversary, you have to cooperate with your opponent, then he joins you as a partner'.

## REFERENCES

- Chari, P.R., Cheema, P.I., & Cohen, S.P. (2009). *Four crises and a peace process: American engagement in South Asia*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Das, D.K. (1992). *SAARC: regional co-operation and development: perspectives, problems, politics*. Deep & Deep Publications.
- Dash, K.C. (2008). *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating cooperation, institutional structures*. Routledge.
- Mansoori, A.S.M. (2017). Newsroom convergence of print and online media: A study of the gulf news and Alittihad in the UAE.
- Iqbal, M.J. (2006). SAARC: origin, growth, potential and achievements. *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, 27(2), 127-140.
- Jabeen, D.M., & Choudhry, P.D.I.A. (2020). Role of SAARC for countering terrorism in South Asia. *South Asian Studies*, 28(2).
- Javaid, U. (2013). *South Asia in Perspective*. Centre for South Asian Studies, University of the Punjab, 136-137.
- Gill, K.P.S. (2016). *Freedom from Fear - Regional Security - India can redeem South Asia*.
- Kumar, R. (2005). South Asian Union. New Delhi Manas Publications, 131-132.
- Lamichhane, S. (2016). *Enhancing SAARC disaster management: a comparative study with ASEAN coordinating centre for humanitarian assistance on disaster management*. Naval Postgraduate School Monterey United States.
- Mearshimer, J.J., & Alterman, G. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company.
- Rynning, S. (2019). *South Asia and the great powers: International relations and regional Security*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sridharan, K. (2008). *Regional Organisations and Conflict Management: comparing ASEAN and SAARC*. Crisis States Research Centre.
- Upreti, B.C., & Upaydhay, S. (2012). *Emerging Challenges of Security in South Asia*.

**Received:** 06-Jan-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-11249; **Editor assigned:** 08-Jan-2022, PreQC No. AMSJ-22-11249(PQ); **Reviewed:** 21-Jan-2022, QC No. AMSJ-22-11249; **Revised:** 28-Jan-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-11249(R); **Published:** 31-Jan-2022