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**Revival of SAARC**

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## REVIVAL OF SAARC

### In Context

- Muhammad Yunus, the head of Bangladesh's interim government, has called for the **revival of the “spirit of SAARC”**, stressing that the eight-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) **can solve many of the region's pressing issues**.

### SAARC's Dormancy

- The **2016 SAARC Summit** to be held in Islamabad, was canceled after the Uri terrorist attack in India, with several countries including Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan declining to participate.
- Last SAARC biennial summit was hosted by Nepal in 2014.
- The various South Asian leaders highlight the **urgent need for SAARC** to become a more active and functional body to address regional challenges, including security concerns, economic cooperation, and humanitarian crises such as the Rohingya situation.

### Reasons for SAARC's Failures

- **Lack of Political Will:** Member states often prioritize national interests over regional cooperation. The absence of strong political commitment from leaders to resolve conflicts or work together hampers SAARC's progress.
  - ◆ Unlike the European Union, where member states have overcome historical differences, South Asian leaders have been less proactive in fostering cooperation.
- **Structural Weakness:** SAARC operates on the principle of unanimity, meaning that all decisions require the consent of every member state. This structure allows any country, particularly India or Pakistan, to veto or block initiatives, resulting in deadlock. This inability to bypass political differences or manage regional conflicts has restricted SAARC's effectiveness.
- **Economic Disparities:** The member countries of SAARC have significant economic disparities. India dominates the region in terms of economic power, which creates resentment among smaller member states who feel overshadowed (**India's Big Brother hegemony**).
- **Limited Scope of Cooperation:** While SAARC has had success in areas such as health, education, and disaster management, it has struggled in more critical areas like security, trade, and economic development. Regional agreements such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) have not been fully implemented, limiting economic cooperation.
- **External Influence:** The geopolitical influence of external powers, such as China and the United States, has added complexity to SAARC's internal dynamics. China's growing presence in South Asia, especially through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has drawn some SAARC members away from a unified approach to regional issues.
- **Internal Conflicts and Political Instability:** Several SAARC countries face internal political instability or conflicts, such as civil wars, military coups, and ethnic insurgencies, which detract from their ability to engage meaningfully in regional cooperation.
  - ◆ For example, Afghanistan's internal conflict, Bangladesh's crisis further undermine SAARC's cohesion.

### Need for SAARC Revival

- **Regional Cooperation for Peace and Security:** A functional SAARC can provide a platform for diplomatic dialogue, confidence-building measures, and peaceful conflict resolution among member nations.
  - ◆ Cooperation on security-related issues like terrorism, cross-border disputes, and cybersecurity is vital for regional stability.
- **Economic Integration and Development:** South Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. A revived SAARC can facilitate greater intra-regional trade, investment, and economic cooperation through agreements like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).

- ◆ Enhanced economic ties can lead to job creation, poverty reduction, and sustainable development for the region's 1.8 billion people.
- **Addressing Common Challenges:** The region faces shared challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, food security, public health crises, and water resource management. A stronger SAARC could coordinate joint efforts to address these issues more effectively through regional initiatives and disaster response mechanisms.
- **Rohingya and Refugee Crisis:** Regional cooperation is crucial for handling humanitarian crises, such as the Rohingya refugee crisis. SAARC can help facilitate discussions on repatriation, resource-sharing, and addressing the root causes of refugee migrations, providing relief to countries like Bangladesh that are under immense strain.
- **Geopolitical Balance:** With China's growing influence in South Asia, reviving SAARC would allow member countries to collaborate more strategically in balancing external powers. This could promote regional autonomy and strengthen South-South cooperation.
- **Leveraging Global Forums:** A revived SAARC can provide South Asia with a stronger collective voice in global forums such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and climate summits, ensuring that the region's interests are represented and advanced on the global stage.

### India's Role and Contribution

- Despite challenges, India continues to support SAARC through initiatives such as the launch of the South Asian Satellite and the establishment of the South Asian University. These initiatives have strengthened regional collaboration in technology, education, and research.
- However, India has also been focusing on interregional initiatives like **BIMSTEC and its Act East Policy**, highlighting the need for SAARC to revitalize itself to remain relevant in the changing geopolitical landscape.

### Way Ahead

- **Strengthening Political Will:** Member states, especially India and Pakistan, need to prioritize regional cooperation over bilateral conflicts. Diplomatic dialogue and confidence-building measures should be initiated to ensure smooth functioning of SAARC.
- **Boosting Intra Regional Trade:** Simplifying trade procedures, enhancing connectivity, and fully implementing the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) can help unlock the region's untapped trade potential and promote economic growth.
- **Leveraging Sub-Regional Initiatives:** While continuing to engage in BIMSTEC and the Act East Policy, India and other members can align these efforts with SAARC goals to ensure mutual growth and regional stability, fostering integration without sidelining SAARC.



### Mains Practice Question

**[Q]** Critically analyze the obstacles faced by SAARC in recent years and suggest a way forward for its effective functioning.