

## THE SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION: GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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The research on the geopolitical dimensions and perspectives of SAARC construction is highly relevant due to several reasons. Firstly, SAARC is an important regional organization in South Asia with the potential to promote economic growth, social progress, and cultural exchange among member states. However, the organization has faced numerous challenges in achieving its objectives, particularly in the face of political tensions and conflicts among member states.

The literature suggests that the historical animosities and conflicts between member states have significantly impacted SAARC's effectiveness and potential. Secondly, the research on SAARC's geopolitical aspects is relevant in light of the changing geopolitical landscape in South Asia. The region has experienced increased competition and influence from external powers which has complicated regional dynamics and made cooperation among SAARC member states more challenging. Thirdly, the relevance of the research lies in the analysis of the potential implications for regional security, with a specific focus on the progress made so far and the opportunities for the future. This highlights the importance of understanding the geopolitical landscape of the region and how it can impact the stability and security of the member states. Therefore, understanding the geopolitical factors that affect SAARC's construction and its ability to improve regional stability is critical to mitigate conflict and promote peace in the region. This paper aims to identify the key assumptions, concepts, and arguments in the literature related to SAARC. The research is expected to illuminate and evaluate the unquestioned assumptions in the literature on SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives. This will help to inform policymaking, promote regional cooperation and integration, and contribute to regional stability and security in South Asia.

**Key words:** SAARC; South Asia; cooperation; International Relations; geopolitics; regional organization; integration.

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# АССОЦИАЦИЯ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА СТРАН ЮЖНОЙ АЗИИ: ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

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Исследование геополитических аспектов и перспектив строительства СААРК весьма актуально по нескольким причинам. Во-первых, СААРК является важной региональной организацией в Южной Азии, которая способствует экономическому росту, социальному прогрессу и культурному обмену между государствами-членами. Однако региональная организация столкнулась с многочисленными проблемами в достижении своих целей, особенно в условиях политической напряженности и конфликтов между государствами-членами.

В литературе описано, что историческая враждебность и конфликты между государствами-членами значительно повлияли на эффективность и потенциал СААРК. Во-вторых, исследование геополитических аспектов СААРК актуально в свете меняющегося геополитического ландшафта в Южной Азии. В регионе усилилась конкуренция и влияние внешних сил, что усложнило региональную динамику и сделало сотрудничество между государствами-членами СААРК более сложным. В-третьих, актуальность исследования заключается в анализе потенциальных последствий для региональной безопасности с особым акцентом на достигнутый прогресс и возможности будущего. Это подчеркивает важность понимания геополитического ландшафта региона и того, как он может повлиять на стабильность и безопасность государств-членов. Поэтому понимание геополитических факторов, влияющих на строительство СААРК, и его способности улучшать региональную стабильность имеет особое значение для смягчения конфликтов и содействия миру в регионе. Эта статья направлена на определение ключевых предположений, концепций и аргументов в литературе, связанных с СААРК. Ожидается, что исследование прольет свет и оценит бесспорные предположения в литературе о геополитических измерениях и перспективах СААРК. Это поможет информировать разработчиков политики, способствовать региональному сотрудничеству и интеграции, а также содействию региональной стабильности и безопасности в Южной Азии.

**Ключевые слова:** СААРК; Южная Азия; сотрудничество; международные отношения; геополитика; региональная организация; интеграция.

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional organization comprising eight member states from South Asia. The organization was established in 1985 with the primary goal of promoting regional cooperation and integration<sup>1</sup> in areas such as economic development, social progress, and cultural exchange. However, despite the potential benefits of regional cooperation, SAARC has faced numerous challenges, particularly in terms of geopolitical factors that have affected its construction. This analytical paper aims to examine the geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction, including the political tensions among member states and the role of external powers in the region. The research is expected to illuminate and evaluate the unquestioned assumptions in the literature on SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives. This will help to inform policymaking, promote regional cooperation and integration, and contribute to regional stability and security in South Asia. The paper will also assess the scientific novelty of the research, describe the research methods used, and outline the goals and objectives of the study.

**Goals and Objectives of the Study.** The primary goal of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction and to illuminate and evaluate unquestioned assumption in the literature. Critically evaluate the validity, reliability, and generalizability of these assumptions, concepts, and arguments based on empirical evidence and alternative perspectives and to develop a nuanced understanding of SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives that acknowledges the complexity, diversity, and dynamics of the region and its interactions with the global context. The study aims to assess the impact of political tensions and conflicts among member states on regional stability and cooperation, and to examine the role of external powers in the region. The involvement of external powers can either facilitate or impede regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of external powers in SAARC construction. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the challenges that SAARC has faced in promoting regional integration and cooperation, and to evaluate the progress made by the organization in achieving its objectives. Another objective of the study is to identify the opportunities and potential areas for further cooperation and integration within the region.

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<sup>1</sup> About SAARC / The South-Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [Electronic resource]. 2020. URL: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/about-saarc> (accessed: 28.02.2023).

**Scientific Novelty.** The scientific novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive and systematic analysis of the geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction. While there have been some studies on this topic, this research provides a more in-depth and up-to-date analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing SAARC. Additionally, this research adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on insights from political science, international relations, and regional studies. The research methods used in the study also contribute to its scientific novelty, including a review of existing literature on SAARC, an analysis of primary and secondary data sources, and expert interviews.

**Research Methods.** The research methods used in this study include a review of existing literature on SAARC, an analysis of primary and secondary data sources, and expert interviews. The literature review involved an extensive search of academic articles, policy papers, and other relevant sources on SAARC and regional integration. The analysis of primary and secondary data sources involved a review of official documents and reports from SAARC, as well as data from regional organizations and international agencies. The expert interviews involved discussions with scholars, policymakers, and regional experts with extensive knowledge of SAARC and regional politics.

**Existing visions in literature.** The literature on SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives has several key assumptions and concepts. One such assumption is that the geopolitical context of South Asia is characterized by inter-state rivalries, mistrust, and security dilemmas. This context has shaped SAARC's functioning and effectiveness, as member states are often hesitant to cooperate and integrate due to concerns over national security and sovereignty. Another key assumption is that SAARC's geopolitical context is further complicated by external factors, such as the influence of major powers and non-state actors in the region.

The literature also highlights several key concepts related to SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives. One such concept is that of regional security, which has been a significant concern for SAARC member states. The literature emphasizes the need for SAARC to develop a regional security framework that can help address common security challenges, such as terrorism and transnational crime. Another key concept is that of regional trade and economic integration. Intra-regional trade within SAARC remains

low, and member states often face trade-related barriers and obstacles. The literature suggests that greater regional trade and economic integration could help promote stability and cooperation in the region.

**Arguments.** The literature on SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives presents several arguments. One such argument is that SAARC's effectiveness is limited due to the dominance of India in the organization. The literature suggests that other member states are often hesitant to cooperate and integrate due to concerns over Indian dominance and interference in their internal affairs. Another argument is that SAARC's effectiveness is limited due to political tensions and conflicts between member states. The literature suggests that political tensions and conflicts have prevented SAARC from realizing its full potential in promoting regional cooperation and integration.

The literature also presents several arguments regarding potential solutions to SAARC's geopolitical challenges. One argument is that SAARC needs to develop a more robust and comprehensive regional security framework that can address common security challenges. Another argument is that SAARC needs to focus on promoting greater regional trade and economic integration, which can help reduce dependence on extra-regional trade partners and enhance economic integration within the region. The literature also emphasizes the need for greater connectivity within the region, both physical and digital, which can help promote greater economic and social integration.

I. Abraham, E. Newman and M. L. Weiss's research "Political Violence in South and Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives" explores the issue of political violence in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions, with a focus on the dynamics and causes of such violence. The authors challenge several unquestioned assumptions that have been prevalent in the literature on political violence in the region [1].

One of the key assumptions that the authors challenge is the notion that political violence is a result of cultural or religious differences. They argue that this view oversimplifies the complexities of political violence and ignores the role of political, economic, and social factors in shaping the dynamics of violence. The authors suggest that political violence is often a response to political and economic grievances, and it is perpetuated by power asymmetries and the struggle for resources.

Another unquestioned assumption that the authors challenge is the idea that political violence is a form of irrational behavior. They argue that political violence is often a rational strategy used by groups

and individuals to achieve political, economic, or social goals. The authors suggest that understanding the rationality of political violence is crucial for developing effective strategies for preventing and addressing it.

Furthermore, the authors challenge the assumption that state actors are the primary perpetrators of political violence. They argue that non-state actors, such as insurgent groups, criminal and terrorism organizations, are increasingly involved in political violence in the region. The authors suggest that addressing the issue of political violence requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the role of both state and non-state actors.

Overall, I. Abraham, E. Newman and M. L. Weiss's research provides a critical perspective on political violence in South and Southeast Asia, challenging several unquestioned assumptions that have been prevalent in the literature on the topic. Their analysis highlights the complex nature of political violence and the need for a nuanced understanding of its dynamics and causes [1].

In the "SAARC and region-building: is South Asia a region?", B. Chakma delves into the intricacies of delineating South Asia as a distinct region. The analysis traces the historical development of the region's identity and examines how contemporary efforts to define it have not unified its regional character but have rather generated a variety of discourses, narratives, and interpretations regarding South Asia [2].

In the "South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation" research, B. Chakma analyzes the assumptions surrounding regionalism in South Asia. The author argues that the dominant assumption that regional cooperation and integration are key for promoting economic growth and development in South Asia is an unquestioned assumption. B. Chakma questions whether regionalism can really achieve the desired economic outcomes in a region as diverse and divided as South Asia, where there are deep-seated political conflicts and security issues [3].

B. Chakma also highlights the assumption that greater connectivity and trade liberalization will automatically lead to peace and stability in the region. He argues that this assumption is questionable, as it overlooks the root causes of conflict and instability in South Asia, such as territorial disputes, historical animosities, and identity politics.

Thus, B. Chakma's analysis challenges the assumption that regionalism is an unqualified good in South Asia and calls for a more nuanced and critical approach to understanding the limits of regional cooperation and integration in the region [3].

In the study on “Conflicts and Conflict Management in SAARC: Assessing the Challenges and Way Forward”, M. Idrees and M. A. Naazer highlight the unquestioned assumption that conflicts in the SAARC region are primarily due to inter-state rivalries and territorial disputes. They argue that this assumption overlooks other important factors, such as ethnic and religious tensions, economic disparities, and historical legacies of colonialism. The authors also point out the unquestioned assumption that the SAARC Charter, which emphasizes non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, is an effective mechanism for conflict management. They argue that this assumption ignores the complex and multi-layered nature of conflicts in the region and the need for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to conflict management [4].

The conference report “SAARC towards Greater Connectivity” high-lights some unquestioned assumptions on SAARC’s geopolitical dimensions and perspectives. One of the key assumptions is that greater connectivity within the SAARC region will necessarily lead to greater economic growth and development. The report notes that while connectivity is important, it is not sufficient on its own to achieve economic growth, and that other factors such as political stability, institutional capacity, and trade facilitation are also important. The report also challenges the assumption that regional connectivity must be limited to physical infrastructure such as roads and ports, and suggests that digital connectivity and soft infrastructure such as education and research collaboration should also be prioritized<sup>2</sup>.

V. Kumar explores SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement as a case study [5].

H. Mahaseth and A. Reddy’s article “The SAARC Framework for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) and the Further Steps Taken for the Realisation of Regional Cooperation” explores the energy cooperation framework in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and highlights some unquestioned assumptions related to energy cooperation. One of the main assumptions is that energy cooperation can be achieved through the establishment of regional grids and interconnections. The authors argue that while this may be a desirable outcome, it is difficult to achieve in reality due to

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<sup>2</sup> Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and India International Centre. (2008). SAARC towards Greater Connectivity. Conference report, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 15-16 January 2008.

various political and economic factors. Another assumption is that energy cooperation will lead to greater regional integration and political stability. The authors argue that while energy cooperation can contribute to these outcomes, it is not a sufficient condition and needs to be complemented with other measures such as trade and investment. Finally, the authors question the assumption that energy cooperation can lead to a more sustainable and climate-friendly energy system. They argue that energy cooperation can exacerbate existing environmental challenges, and there is a need to incorporate sustainability considerations in the design and implementation of energy cooperation initiatives [6].

S. Perere's study compares the impacts of different trade policy options [7]. N. Soheni analyzing long-standing disputes over the border area of Kalapani [8].

R. Raghurampatruni, M. Senthil and N. Gayathri critically evaluate in their study "The Future Potential and Prospects of SAARC Regional Grouping" the unquestioned assumption that SAARC has the potential to emerge as a strong regional grouping in the future. They argue that although SAARC has the potential to foster regional cooperation and integration, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to realize this potential [9].

One of the key assumptions they question is the idea that economic integration alone can drive regional cooperation and growth. They argue that other factors such as political will, security cooperation, and people-to-people contacts are equally important for building trust and promoting regional cooperation.

Another assumption they question is the assumption that SAARC member states share a common vision and interest in regional cooperation. They argue that the divergent interests and priorities of member states pose a significant challenge to the realization of SAARC's potential.

Moreover, they also question the assumption that SAARC's potential is constrained solely by external factors such as the unresolved conflicts between member states and interference by external powers. They argue that internal factors such as institutional weakness, lack of political will, and bureaucratic hurdles also play a significant role in hindering regional cooperation.

Generally, the authors critically evaluate several assumptions about the potential and prospects of SAARC and highlight the need for addressing the underlying challenges to realize SAARC's potential as a strong regional grouping [9].



S. Sandeep, K. Amanpreet and S. Amandeep in their work “Changing equations of India-Pakistan relations: unresolved Kashmir dispute as a decider factor” focused on the unresolved Kashmir dispute and its impact on India-Pakistan relations. The authors identified several unquestioned assumptions in the literature, including the assumption that Kashmir is the only issue between India and Pakistan, the assumption that the conflict is primarily a bilateral issue, and the assumption that the conflict can be resolved through negotiations between India and Pakistan alone [10].

The authors argued that these assumptions ignore the fact that the Kashmir conflict has wider regional implications and involves other stakeholders such as China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. They also argued that the conflict is not just about Kashmir, but also about broader issues such as religious identity and nationalism. Finally, they argued that the conflict cannot be resolved through bilateral negotiations alone, but requires a more comprehensive approach that takes into account the concerns of all stakeholders and addresses the root causes of the conflict [10].

The United Nations report titled “Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward” examines the potential benefits of regional economic cooperation and integration in South Asia. The report highlights the region’s enormous potential for economic growth and development through increased trade, investment, and cooperation<sup>3</sup>.

The report identifies several key barriers to regional cooperation and integration, including political tensions, lack of infrastructure, and inadequate institutional frameworks. The report argues that addressing these challenges requires sustained political commitment and cooperation among South Asian countries, as well as support from international organizations and development partners<sup>4</sup>.

The report also highlights several areas where regional economic cooperation and integration could have significant benefits, including in trade, energy, transport, and tourism. For example, the report notes that increased trade within South Asia could result in significant gains in terms of economic growth and job creation<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations. (2018). Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward. Report for Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Report. No. A X (5-012):337.91 Uni SSWA. 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. (2018). Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and

Overall, the United Nations report underscores the importance of regional economic cooperation and integration in South Asia, and highlights the potential benefits that could be realized through increased cooperation among the region's countries<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives are complex and multifaceted, with several key assumptions, concepts, and arguments that require further analysis and evaluation. By examining these factors critically and objectively, policymakers and scholars can identify opportunities and challenges for SAARC and its member states, and work towards promoting regional cooperation, integration, and stability.

**Political Tensions and Conflicts among Member States.** One of the key challenges facing SAARC's construction is the presence of political tensions and conflicts among member states. The most significant of these tensions is the long-standing border dispute between India and Pakistan, which has hindered SAARC's ability to foster regional stability and cooperation. The dispute has led to a lack of trust between the two countries, making it difficult to reach agreements on regional issues such as trade, energy, and transport connectivity. Similarly, the ongoing conflict between India and Nepal over the Kalapani region has also hampered SAARC's efforts to promote regional integration. The dispute has led to a deterioration in bilateral relations between India and Nepal, which has in turn affected regional dynamics [8, p. 1–12].

The geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction have played a significant role in the organization's ability to promote regional integration and cooperation. The presence of political tensions is one of the most significant challenges facing SAARC. Despite the organization's goal of promoting regional cooperation, member states have struggled to overcome their historical and political differences. India and Pakistan, the two largest and most powerful members of SAARC, have had a contentious relationship since the partition of British India in 1947, resulting in numerous conflicts and political disputes [10, p. 89]. The ongoing territorial dispute over Kashmir remains a significant source of tension between the two countries, with India accusing Pakistan of supporting separatist movements in the region [1, p. 105].

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Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward. Report for Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Report. No. A X (5-012):337.91 Uni SSWA. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, political tensions between Bangladesh and Pakistan have also hindered regional cooperation within SAARC. Bangladesh has accused Pakistan of committing war crimes during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which resulted in the formation of Bangladesh. The issue has strained diplomatic ties between the two countries and prevented them from engaging in meaningful cooperation within the SAARC framework.

Sri Lanka and India have also had a tense relationship due to the Sri Lankan Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2009. India supported the Tamil Tigers, a rebel group fighting for an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka, while the Sri Lankan government received military assistance from Pakistan and China. The conflict resulted in significant loss of life and strained diplomatic relations between India and Sri Lanka.

Nepal and Bhutan have relatively amicable relationships with their neighbors, but both countries have their own unique political challenges that have affected their engagement with SAARC. Nepal has struggled with political instability and governance issues, which have hindered its ability to participate effectively in regional initiatives. Bhutan has traditionally maintained a policy of isolationism and neutrality, which has limited its engagement with SAARC and other regional organizations.

The geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction have also been influenced by the internal political dynamics of member states. For instance, the political instability in Afghanistan has had a spillover effect on the region, particularly in terms of terrorism and security concerns.

Neighbouring countries have expressed concerns about India's dominant position in the region and its perceived interference in their internal affairs, fueled by India's size and strength [4, p. 5].

Overall, the presence of political tensions among member states has been a significant barrier to regional cooperation within SAARC. Despite the organization's efforts to promote dialogue and cooperation, historical grievances and ongoing conflicts have prevented meaningful progress on key regional issues.

**Role of External Powers in the Region.** Another factor that has affected SAARC's construction is the influence of external powers in the region. The region has attracted the attention of major global powers such as the United States, China, European Union, Russia and Great Britain, all of whom have their own interests in the

region. The involvement of external powers in the region has led to a power struggle among them, which has further complicated regional dynamics and contributed to political tensions and instability. For example, the United States has sought to expand its influence in the region through its strategic partnerships with countries such as India, while China has pursued its economic interests in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The role of external powers in the region has also had a significant impact on SAARC construction. South Asia has long been a region of interest for external powers due to its strategic location and economic potential<sup>7</sup>. The involvement of external powers can either facilitate or impede regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of external powers in SAARC construction.

One external power that has had a significant influence on the region is China. China has been increasing its influence in South Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative, which includes investments in infrastructure projects in several SAARC member states, including Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While the BRI presents opportunities for regional development and cooperation, it also raises concerns about debt sustainability and strategic implications. This has raised concerns in India about China's growing presence in the region and its potential to challenge India's influence.

The rivalry between India and China, for example, has had implications for regional security and economic cooperation.

Similarly, India's relationship with the United States has also had implications for SAARC. The US has been increasingly focused on the Indo-Pacific region, which includes South Asia, as part of its strategic competition with China. The US has sought to deepen its ties with India and other regional powers to counter China's growing influence. This has resulted in increased US engagement with SAARC, including initiatives to promote economic development and regional security.

However, its dominance has also been a source of tension with other member states, particularly smaller countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. India's perceived hegemony in the region has sometimes undermined the trust and cooperation between member states, which has hindered the progress of SAARC. India, as the largest country in the region, has played a significant role in SAARC.

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations. (2018). Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward. Report for Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Report. No. A X (5-012):337.91 Uni SSWA. 2017.

Another external power that has had an impact on SAARC is the United States. The US has been involved in the region for several decades, particularly through its strategic partnership with India. While the US has been supportive of SAARC's goals, its strategic interests in the region have sometimes conflicted with the organization's objectives. For example, the US has been critical of Pakistan's role in supporting terrorism in the region, which has hindered regional cooperation and stability.

As an external power, Great Britain plays a significant role in the development of SAARC. Historically, Great Britain has had close ties with several member states of SAARC, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, due to its colonial past in the region and the legacy of British imperialism has shaped the political, economic, and social systems of these countries. As such, there is a shared history between Great Britain and SAARC that provides a basis for cooperation and collaboration.

The cooperation between SAARC and Great Britain has significant geopolitical aspects, and the two entities have engaged in various activities aimed at enhancing regional stability, security, and economic development. One of the key areas of cooperation between SAARC and Great Britain is in promoting regional security, particularly in countering terrorism and violent extremism. Great Britain has provided significant support to SAARC member states in enhancing their counter-terrorism capabilities, including through training, capacity building, and sharing of intelligence. The UK has provided support for peacekeeping missions in the region and has worked with SAARC member states to address common security challenges.

One of the key roles played by Great Britain in SAARC is in providing economic and development assistance to member states. The UK is one of the largest donors to the region, providing significant amounts of aid and technical assistance in areas such as health, education, and economic development. This assistance has helped to promote regional stability and reduce poverty in the region.

Another area of cooperation is in the field of trade and investment. Great Britain is one of the largest investors in South Asia and is a significant trading partner for many SAARC member states. The two sides have been working to deepen economic ties through bilateral trade agreements and investment promotion initiatives.

One area of cooperation between SAARC and Great Britain is in the field of education. Great Britain has a long tradition of providing

education in South Asia, with many universities and schools established during the colonial period. Today, the British Council, which is the UK's international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities, works closely with SAARC member states to promote educational exchanges and collaborations.

Overall, the role of Great Britain as an external power in SAARC has been focused on promoting regional cooperation and integration in various areas, including economic development, trade, security, and political stability. Its historical ties with the region and its economic and political influence have allowed it to play an important role in shaping the development of SAARC.

Russia has also sought to deepen its engagement with the region through its diplomatic and military ties, energy and infrastructure cooperation, as well as Russia want to increase trade and investment with the SAARC member countries. The Russian Federation has cooperated with SAARC member states on counter-terrorism and security issues, as well as on initiatives to promote regional stability and conflict resolution. In addition, Russia has sought to enhance cooperation with SAARC member states in the areas of science and technology, including through joint research and development projects. Overall, Russia's engagement with SAARC member states is aimed at promoting regional integration, enhancing stability and security, and promoting economic and cultural exchange.

As mentioned by Director General of Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan Major General I. Babar during the interview with "Global Village Space" Magazine in 2020: "What we want to and what we keep telling the international community, and our friends in the rest of the world, the international community has to understand that any major disturbance in the balance of power in South-Asia will be a major disaster, not only for the region but also for the rest of the world, so this balance of power must be maintained at every level and the more it is disturbed, the more it gets lopsided, the more dangerous it becomes"<sup>8</sup>.

However, the role of external powers in the region has also created challenges for SAARC. Some member states, particularly Pakistan, have been skeptical of India's growing ties with the US and other external powers, viewing it as a threat to their sovereignty

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<sup>8</sup> DG ISPR Gen. Babar Iftikhar on Pakistan & Fifth Generation Warfare // Global Village Space Magazine [Electronic resource]. 2020. Vol. III, Issue XII. URL: <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/dgisprgen-babar-iftikhar-on-pakistan-fifth-generation-warfare/> (accessed: 02.09.2023).

and regional influence. This has hindered regional cooperation within SAARC and created divisions among member states.

### **SAARC's Progress in Promoting Regional Integration.**

Despite aforementioned challenges, SAARC has made some progress in promoting regional cooperation and integration. For instance, the organization has been successful in promoting trade liberalization and economic cooperation among member states through the establishment of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the promotion of regional connectivity through initiatives such as the South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) and the South Asian University (SAU)<sup>9</sup>. SAFTA has resulted in increased trade among member states, with trade within the region increasing from \$5.5 billion in 2004 to \$25 billion in 2014 [11]. The organization has taken several initiatives to increase people-to-people contact, including the establishment of the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, which allows for visa-free travel among member states for certain categories of people. Additionally, SAARC has played a crucial role in addressing common regional challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, and poverty reduction. Furthermore, SAARC has fostered cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity through initiatives such as the SAARC Cultural Centre and the SAARC Youth Awards. Through its programs and initiatives, SAARC has helped to improve the lives of millions of people in the region.

SAARC has also made progress in promoting social and cultural integration among member states. The organization has initiated several programs and initiatives to promote cooperation in areas such as education, health, and culture. SAARC has established the South Asian University in New Delhi, which aims to promote regional integration through education and research. The organization has also established the SAARC Cultural Centre in Colombo, which aims to promote cultural exchange and cooperation among member states.

Moreover, SAARC has taken steps to address common social challenges facing member states, including poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequality. The organization has established several programs to address these challenges, including the SAARC Social

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations ESCAP. Poverty and Development Division. (2005). Asia-Pacific development journal. Vol. 12, No. 1, 155 p.



Charter and the SAARC Gender Information and Development Centre.

However, there is still a long way to go in terms of achieving the objectives of SAARC. While SAFTA has been established, progress in implementing the agreement has been slow, and several member states continue to impose trade barriers that hinder regional trade. Moreover, the organization has been criticized for its lack of decision-making power and its inability to address the political tensions and conflicts among member states. The failure to hold regular meetings and to reach agreements on important issues has led to skepticism about the organization's ability to make a real difference in the region.

However, the progress has been limited, and the organization has not been able to fully realize its potential in promoting regional cooperation and integration.

#### **Opportunities for Further Cooperation and Integration.**

Despite the challenges facing SAARC, there are still opportunities for further cooperation and integration within the region. One area of potential cooperation is in the field of energy, with the development of regional energy infrastructure and cooperation in renewable energy. The region has enormous potential for renewable energy, with several member states having abundant solar, wind and hydro-power resources. A regional approach to energy could help to address energy security concerns and promote sustainable development. However, several member states still face energy shortages and rely heavily on non-renewable energy sources such as coal and oil. A regional approach to energy cooperation could help to address these issues, promote energy security and sustainability, and reduce dependence on non-renewable energy sources.

One such initiative is the SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) signed in 2014, which aims to facilitate cross-border energy trade, develop regional energy infrastructure, and promote renewable energy cooperation [6]. While progress has been slow due to political tensions and technical challenges, there is still significant potential for further cooperation in the energy sector.

Another area of potential cooperation is in the field of regional security, with the establishment of a regional security framework that could help address common security challenges such as terrorism and transnational crime. The region has been plagued by security concerns, with several member states experiencing terrorism and



violent extremism. A regional approach to security could help to address these issues and promote greater stability and cooperation.

One of the most significant areas for further cooperation within SAARC is trade. Intra-regional trade within SAARC remains low, accounting for only 5% of the region's total trade<sup>10</sup>.

There is immense potential for increasing trade among member states, particularly in areas such as agriculture, textiles, and pharmaceuticals. A more robust intra-regional trade regime would help to reduce dependence on extra-regional trade partners and enhance economic integration within the region.

To achieve this, SAARC has already taken several steps, such as the signing of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement in 2004 [7, p. 539]. However, implementation has been slow due to political tensions among member states, tariff and non-tariff barriers, and other trade-related obstacles.

Additionally, there is potential for greater cooperation in areas such as education, health, and tourism. Improved regional connectivity and cooperation could help to promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise in these areas, leading to greater social and economic development in the region.

Connectivity is another critical area for further cooperation and integration within SAARC. The region's poor infrastructure and lack of connectivity are significant obstacles to regional integration and development. Improved connectivity, both physical and digital, could help to promote greater economic and social integration, facilitate the movement of goods and people, and enhance regional trade and investment.

Several initiatives have been undertaken to improve connectivity within SAARC, such as the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) and the SAARC Agreement on Railways [5, p. 1-13]. However, implementation has been slow due to political tensions and technical challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, security concerns, and regulatory barriers. Therefore, greater political will and commitment from member states are necessary to make progress in improving connectivity within the region.

The areas of trade, energy, and connectivity offer immense potential for enhancing regional integration and development. To

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations. (2018). Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward. Report for Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Report. No. A X (5-012):337.91 Uni SSWA. 2017.

achieve these goals, greater political will and commitment from member states are necessary, along with concerted efforts to address the various obstacles and challenges. By taking advantage of these opportunities, SAARC can become a more integrated and prosperous region, promoting peace, stability, and economic growth.

**Conclusion.** The geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction have played a significant role in the organization's ability to promote regional integration and cooperation. The presence of political tensions and conflicts among member states, as well as the influence of external powers in the region, has hampered SAARC's efforts to achieve its objectives. China's growing influence in the region, India's perceived hegemony, and the US's strategic interests have all complicated the organization's objectives. Additionally, the internal political dynamics of member states have also contributed to the challenges facing SAARC.

In the literature related to SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives highlights several key assumptions, concepts, and arguments. The geopolitical context of South Asia is characterized by interstate rivalries, mistrust, and security dilemmas, which have shaped SAARC's functioning and effectiveness. The literature emphasizes the need for SAARC to develop a regional security framework, promote greater regional trade and economic integration, and enhance regional connectivity to address these challenges. By taking advantage of these opportunities, SAARC can become a more integrated and prosperous region, promoting peace, stability, and economic growth.

However, the organization has made some progress in promoting regional economic cooperation, addressing common challenges, and fostering cultural exchange. There are also opportunities for further cooperation and integration within the region, particularly in the areas of energy, security, and social development. To achieve its objectives, SAARC will need to navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region and find ways to build trust and cooperation among its member states [2, p. 8–15].

Despite the potential benefits of regional cooperation, member states have struggled to overcome historical grievances and ongoing conflicts, creating barriers to meaningful progress on key regional issues.

While SAARC has made some progress in promoting regional cooperation and integration, its potential has not been fully realized. The organization needs to address the political tensions and external factors that have hindered its progress. SAARC also needs to adopt

a more pragmatic approach to regional cooperation, focusing on areas where progress can be made rather than trying to address all the complex issues facing the region. Finally, SAARC needs to strengthen its institutional capacity and governance to effectively address the challenges and opportunities facing the region.

Several authors have analyzed SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives, and their research highlights several key assumptions, concepts, and arguments in the literature which are considered in current paper. Firstly, SAARC's geopolitical significance is evident from its location in a strategic region that connects South Asia with Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia. Therefore, SAARC is seen as an important platform for promoting regional connectivity, trade, and economic growth.

Secondly, SAARC's geopolitical dynamics are shaped by the strategic competition and rivalry between India and Pakistan, the two largest and most powerful members of the organization. This rivalry has hindered SAARC's ability to promote regional cooperation and integration, as well as address common challenges such as terrorism and climate change.

Thirdly, the research on SAARC's geopolitical aspects is relevant due to its potential implications for regional security, with a focus on progress already made and future opportunities. For instance, SAARC's efforts to promote connectivity and economic integration through the SAARC Framework Agreement on Regional Connectivity could enhance regional security by reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting economic growth.

Fourthly, SAARC's geopolitical significance is also evident from its interactions with other regional and global powers, such as China and the United States. China's growing influence in South Asia has prompted India to strengthen its ties with SAARC members, while the United States has sought to engage with SAARC as part of its efforts to promote stability and security in the region.

In conclusion, SAARC's geopolitical dimensions and perspectives are complex and multifaceted, with several key assumptions, concepts, and arguments that were analyzed and evaluated. By examining these factors critically and objectively, policymakers and scholars can identify opportunities and challenges for SAARC and its member states, and work towards promoting regional cooperation, integration, and stability.

Thus, the geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction have had significant implications for regional stability and cooperation.

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Thus, the geopolitical aspects of SAARC construction have had significant implications for regional stability and cooperation.

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