

Perceptive the Failures of SAARC and BIMSTEC and the Growing Significance of SAGAR

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia is markedly complex, characterized by historical tensions, cultural diversity, and economic disparities. Regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) were established with the intent of fostering collaboration and addressing common challenges. However, these institutions have faced significant hurdles, including political discord among member states and a lack of commitment to collective goals. Despite their potential, they often fall short in executing initiatives that could lead to tangible benefits for their populations. In light of these shortcomings, it is imperative to explore alternative frameworks, such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative, which presents a more inclusive and forward-thinking approach to regional cooperation and development. Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the complexities of South Asian geopolitics and advancing mutual prosperity.

KEYWORDS: Cultural, Cooperation, Diversity, Economic, Geopolitical, and Prosperity

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia is markedly complex, characterized by historical tensions, cultural diversity, and economic disparities. Regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) were established with the intent of fostering collaboration and addressing common challenges. However, these institutions have faced significant hurdles, including political discord among member states and a lack of commitment to collective goals. Despite their potential, they often fall short in executing initiatives that could lead to tangible benefits for their populations. In light of these shortcomings, it is imperative to explore alternative frameworks, such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative, which presents a more inclusive and forward-thinking approach to regional cooperation and development. Understanding these dynamics is essential for

addressing the complexities of South Asian geopolitics and advancing mutual prosperity.

Examining the Goals and Importance of SAARC and BIMSTEC in the South Asian Region:

- South Asia, characterized by diverse economies and rich cultural heritage, faces significant challenges that hinder regional cooperation and development.
- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) were established to foster economic integration, social progress, and political stability among member states.
- Yet, both organizations have struggled to achieve their objectives effectively. SAARC, formed amidst hostilities between its members, has seen intra-regional trade stagnate at less than 5% (Islam et al.).
- In contrast, BIMSTEC seeks to leverage geographical and cultural ties to enhance trade

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and investment opportunities but faces similar obstacles due to differing economic priorities among its members. Their limited effectiveness highlights the need for a unified framework like SAGAR, which emphasizes coastal and maritime security while addressing the underlying barriers to collaboration in South Asia.

Reasons for the Failure of SAARC:

The lack of significant progress within SAARC can largely be attributed to the political tensions and economic disparities among member states, which have hindered effective collaboration.

Formed amidst hostilities, SAARC faces challenges such as asymmetrical economies and differing national interests that complicate consensus on critical issues.

Despite the framework established by SAFTA to encourage trade liberalization, intra-regional trade remains shockingly low, below 5% ((Islam et al.)).

Moreover, while many member nations grasp the fundamentals of regional cooperation, the failure to implement cohesive and time-bound tariff reductions has perpetuated inefficiencies ((Islam et al.)).

Consequently, the limited integration and inadequate mechanisms to address non-tariff barriers undermine SAARC's potential to foster economic development. These factors contribute to SAARC's inability to fully realize its objectives, signalling a pressing need for an alternative framework, such as SAGAR, to enhance regional cooperation and growth.

Political tensions and lack of cooperation among member states:

Political tensions among South Asian nations significantly hinder prospects for regional cooperation, ultimately stifling initiatives like SAARC and BIMSTEC. Historical hostilities and disparities in economic power have created a fractured landscape where collaboration is often met with scepticism and resistance. For instance, the original framework of SAARC, established against a backdrop of political animosities, has not successfully facilitated intra-regional integration, leaving trade levels alarmingly low at less than 5% among member states (Islam et al.). This lack of cooperation not only limits economic opportunities but also prevents effective collective action on pressing regional challenges, such as climate change and security threats. Moreover, India's foreign policy, which has evolved significantly since independence, often reflects a tension between national interests and regional commitments, leading to a cautious approach in its dealings with neighboring countries (Mitra et al.). As a result, without addressing these deep-rooted

issues of political distrust, any efforts to enhance regional cooperation are likely to fall short.

Reasons for the Failure of BIMSTEC:

Despite its potential, BIMSTEC has struggled to realize its objectives due to a combination of bureaucratic inertia and insufficient political will among member states.

- The organization initially emphasized critical issues such as transport and communication, as outlined in its 2018 Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, yet tangible progress has been slow and often hampered by geopolitical tensions within the region (Sohini Bose et al.).
- Additionally, disaster management a sector that gained importance post the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has seen minimal advancements, revealing an alarming shortfall in cooperative strategies to address natural calamities that frequently afflict the Bay of Bengal region (Sohini Bose).
- These factors highlight a broader systemic failure within BIMSTEC, where ambitious goals often fall victim to a lack of coordination and commitment, ultimately stalling the very mechanisms needed to foster enduring regional collaboration.
- Thus, to fulfil its potential, BIMSTEC must navigate these entrenched obstacles with renewed focus and dedication.

Limited economic integration and ineffective implementation of initiatives:

Despite the potential benefits of regional cooperation, the South Asian region has struggled with limited economic integration and the ineffective implementation of initiatives aimed at fostering collaboration. For instance, intra-regional trade accounts for less than 5% of the total trade, suggesting that existing frameworks like SAFTA have fallen short of their goals, particularly in enhancing trade liberalization and reducing tariff barriers (Islam et al.). Additionally, the lack of harmonized regulations and standards continues to hinder the growth of a cohesive market environment. This is evident in the challenges faced by the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region, where the absence of effective policy guidelines has limited opportunities for sustainable mountain development ('Springer Science and Business Media LLC'). Such detrimental factors highlight the urgency of initiating a more inclusive and actionable framework, such as SAGAR, which could prioritize overcoming the existing shortfalls and promote meaningful collaboration and economic growth among member states.

The Importance of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region):

Addressing the pressing challenges faced by South Asia necessitates a cohesive framework that promotes both security and economic growth; this is where the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) becomes paramount. The existing regional frameworks, such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, have struggled to achieve their goals due to geopolitical tensions and economic asymmetries. For instance, while SAFTA aims to enhance trade among member states, intra-regional trade remains below 5% due to tariff and non-tariff barriers (Islam et al.). By adopting the SAGAR approach, South Asian nations can foster a collaborative environment that prioritizes mutual security and inclusive economic development. Emphasizing cooperative trade practices while addressing past failures can allow for improved productivity and better integration of regional economies, as indicated by the need for harmonious external tariffs and reduced non-tariff barriers (Islam et al.). Ultimately, SAGAR holds the potential to transform regional dynamics, ensuring growth that benefits all stakeholders while stabilizing the often-fractious political landscape.

Potential for fostering regional cooperation and addressing contemporary challenges:

Amid rising global challenges, the need for effective regional cooperation is more pressing than ever, particularly in South Asia, where organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC struggle to fulfill their intended roles. A significant obstacle is the limited intra-regional trade, which remains below 5%, highlighting the urgency for comprehensive tariff reductions and the harmonization of trade processes to foster economic interdependence (Islam et al.). Moreover, as India gains economic and political clout on the world stage, its regional engagement becomes pivotal in addressing broader issues such as security, climate change, and health crises (Mitra et al.). Initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) not only represent a proactive approach to regional integration but also emphasize the importance of strategic collaboration among South Asian nations. By shifting focus towards cooperative frameworks, countries can better tackle contemporary challenges while enhancing their collective security and prosperity.

Summary of the failures of SAARC and BIMSTEC and the necessity of SAGAR for future progress:

The limitations of both SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) underscore the urgent need for a new regional approach to foster cooperation and development in South Asia. SAARC has been plagued by political tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, which have stymied collective decision-making and initiatives. Similarly, BIMSTEC, while promising, has struggled with inconsistent member engagement and a lack of strategic focus, leading to ineffective implementation of its goals. The consequent stagnation in regional integration has hindered economic growth and social development for member states. In light of these challenges, the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative emerges as a crucial framework that prioritizes maritime security and collaboration, thus addressing both security concerns and economic opportunities. Adopting SAGAR can pave the way for a holistic approach that fosters genuine partnership and sustainable growth in the region.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by regional cooperation in South Asia highlight the pressing need for a more effective framework like SAGAR. Both SAARC and BIMSTEC have struggled to achieve meaningful integration due to persistent political tensions and inadequate economic collaboration, resulting in intra-regional trade remaining below 5% despite efforts like SAFTA (Islam et al.). The lack of a cohesive approach to maritime security and trade engagement further exacerbates these issues, as shown by the ineffective responses to drug trafficking and other security threats in the Indian Ocean Region (Dharmarathne et al.). Moving forward, the SAGAR initiative could bridge the gaps left by previous organizations by fostering mutual understanding and collaboration among member nations. Emphasizing enhanced maritime security and economic engagement will not only address current failures but also promote stability and growth, ultimately transforming the region into a more unified and prosperous entity.

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