



## Revival Of SAARC

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Recently, Prime Minister of India proposed to set up a **South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Emergency Fund** (\$10 million) and formation of a **Rapid Response Team** (of doctors, specialists, testing equipment and attendant infrastructure) in order to combat **Covid-19**.

Though, this initiative may or may not fully succeed in eradicating the epidemic, in a densely-populated South Asia which has very poor public health awareness and infrastructure. However, this may have prompted the reactivation and revival of the SAARC.

## Problems faced by SAARC nations vis-a-vis Coronavirus

- The Maldives and Sri Lanka highlighted the massive economic impact of the dramatic decline of tourism that is a major source of revenue and employment.
- Land-locked Afghanistan is struggling to cope with the open border with virus-infected Iran and Pakistan's decision to close the border through which much of the nation's trade flows occur.
- Apart from this, many SAARC countries share borders with China, the place where the virus originated.
- Also, the population density in Indian subcontinent is very high, so there are more chances of rapid transmission of infection.

## Idea of SAARC

In 1980's the idea of SAARC was initiated by General Zia Ur Rehman of Bangladesh, which resulted in the first summit of the seven leaders of the region in 1985. Later, Afghanistan joined in 2007. However, in the nearly 35 years of its existence, SAARC has not lived up to its promise of regional integration.

- South Asia is the world's least integrated region; less than 5% of the trade of SAARC countries is within.

- A South Asian Free Trade Zone, which was agreed on in 2006, has not been materialised yet.
- The 19th SAARC summit, scheduled to be held in Islamabad in November 2016, was postponed after the terrorist attacks in Uri; none has been held since then.

## Why SAARC failed?

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- Most of the smaller states and external players believe that the India-Pakistan conflict has undermined SAARC.
- The reasons for a dysfunctional SAARC:
  - Bilateral issues cannot be discussed in SAARC but since the organisation relies on the principle of unanimity for all major decisions, Pakistan has often vetoed the major initiatives proposed at SAARC. For example, **SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement proposed at Kathmandu summit, 2014.**
  - For India, Pakistan's use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy has made normal business impossible.
  - Dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Durand line, is also a reason.
  - Also, India's economic position vis-a vis other SAARC countries, creates an impression of India being a big brother rather than a strategic partner.
- **Lack of Trust in Indo-Pakistan relations:** After the deadly terror attack on the Indian security forces at Uri in 2016, India refused to engage with the SAARC. Since then, the SAARC has become almost marginal to the regions' collective consciousness and other organisations such as the **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)** came into the forefront.

## Should India continue to neglect SAARC over BIMSTEC?

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The two organisations—SAARC and BIMSTEC—focus on geographically overlapping regions. However, this does not make them equal alternatives.

- SAARC is a purely regional organisation, whereas BIMSTEC is interregional and connects both South Asia and ASEAN. BIMSTEC provides SAARC countries a unique opportunity to connect with ASEAN.
- Further, the scope of BIMSTEC has been undermined by China. Thailand and Myanmar are now economically and strategically closer to China. Apart from it, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh also have extensive economic engagement with China and are struggling to work out balancing strategies between India and China.
- The revival of SAARC will also facilitate India's neighbourhood policy in meeting the challenge of regional strategic encroachment by China through its Belt and Road Initiative.

- Thus, insofar as their regions of interest overlap, SAARC and BIMSTEC complement each other in terms of functions and goals. . The success of BIMSTEC does not render SAARC pointless; it only adds a new chapter in regional cooperation in South Asia.

## **BIMSTEC vs SAARC**

<b>SAARC</b>	<b>BIMSTEC</b>
A regional organisation looking into integrating South Asia.	Interregional organisation connecting South Asia and SouthEast Asia.
Established in 1985; a product of the Cold War era.	Established in 1997 in the post-Cold War.
Member countries suffer from mistrust and suspicion.	Members maintain reasonably friendly relations.
Suffers from regional politics.	Member countries share strategic trust amongst each other.
Asymmetric power balance.	Balancing of power with the presence of Thailand and India on the bloc.
Intra-regional trade only 5%	Intra-regional trade has increased by around 6% in a decade

## **Conclusion**

The tragedy of Covid-19 may provide an opportunity for India to demonstrate its compassionate face to secure a region at peace with itself. This emergency fund is a step in reviving SAARC which has been dysfunctional till now, is a reiteration of India's prompt and decisive support to the neighbours at the time of facing natural disasters. However, the dream of New South Asia requires much more diplomatic and political will.

***Drishti Mains Question***

The success of BIMSTEC does not overshadow the role of SAARC in contemporary international relations. Critically analyse.