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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. SAARC has been a 'failure' in promoting regional cooperation, conflict resolution and peace building in the region. Critically examine. (250 words).

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Approach

- Describe SAARC briefly.
- Describe how SAARC failed to promote regional cooperation, conflict resolution and ensuring lasting peace in South Asia.
- Criticize given statement through illustrations where SAARC has been able to promote regional cooperation, conflict resolution and peace.
- Give conclusion.

Answer

Introduction

- SAARC was founded in 1985 with seven South Asian countries — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The membership grew to eight when Afghanistan joined in 2007.
- The organization aims to achieve peace, freedom, social justice, and economic prosperity by promoting a shared understanding, good neighborly relations, and meaningful cooperation.

Body

- South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world. Promoting intra-regional connectivity through trade is one of the primary focus areas of SAARC. However, even after three decades of existence, intra-SAARC trade stands at a meager 5% of South Asia's total trade.
- In the last 33 years, SAARC has held only 18 Summits. In the last decade, the frequency of summits have also reduced. The meetings have been installed due to bilateral issues between members, such as tension between India Pakistan.
- SAARC's charter provides that decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity and bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations. However, the unanimity clause enables any member to veto any proposal, and the prohibition on the raising of bilateral issues reduces the possibility of solving conflicts and concerns of member states. For instance, trans-South Asian road connectivity project has been hindered due to Pakistan.
- Due to high level of mistrust, power asymmetry and persistence of bilateral conflicts, it has proven hard for SAARC countries to come to a unanimous agreement on vital issues.
- Trade and foreign direct investment inflow and outflow from the region is significantly low as compared to other regional blocs and other emerging markets in Asia. Despite the thrust for regional economic integration propelled SAFTA, there are critical obstacles to an optimal economic integration in South Asia.

Achievements of SAARC

- SAARC has achieved significant success in economic field and has ventured into vital cooperation in the core sectors of trade, commerce, finance and money.
- The most important agreement, SAFTA, has led to abolition of double taxation, free movement of certain commodities across the border and preferential treatment to regional trade than trade outside the region.
- SAARC has gained lot of momentum in the fields of Education, Sports, Culture and media. South Asian University has become fully functional and there are scholarships & fellowships for research in various fields. Cultural exchanges takes place through film festivals, literary seminars, cultural festivals, media programmes and food festivals, etc.

Conclusion:

- The vision to integrate the South Asian region requires that the challenges are addressed judiciously by member countries. It requires that conflicts among the countries are recognized and resolved through peaceful discussions.
- SAARC may be used as leading mechanism to resolve the conflicts among the members. There should be understanding among members that cancelling or postponing summit meetings will be loss to socio-economic well being of South Asia.