

The Role of Pakistan in Shaping Regional Stability: A Critical Analysis of SAARC's Effectiveness in Promoting Peace and Cooperation in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the participation of Pakistan in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is studied with regard to its capacity to shape regional stability. Then it critically analyzes how much Pakistan does in the SAARC's sense as a means to achieve its goals of economic cooperation, peacebuilding, and security in South Asia in view of its political tensions with India. Political and security challenges have prevented Pakistan from actively engaging in regional security endeavors and humanitarian cooperation, thereby obstructing the organization's utility. The paper illustrates that barring the political issues, SAARC has successfully been involved in disaster relief and health activities, but in other areas, like economic and security arrangements, there is a lack of consensus due to bilateral issues between Pakistan and India. The study indicates that long-term stability with the SAARC does not depend on any political cooperation; rather, it needs to concentrate on the non-political cooperation and, simultaneously, try to reconcile the underlying political tensions.

Keywords: Pakistan, SAARC, Regional Stability, Economic Cooperation, Security, Humanitarian Cooperation, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

The South Asian area attracts analysts because it brings together nations with their deep histories and cultural differences that influence regional peace. In 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) formed its mission to help member countries grow economically and socially while uniting for peace. As the region's top player, Pakistan holds a special status because it controls

military power and strategic land spots while guiding how neighbors connect on a geopolitical level. This research explores how Pakistan helps maintain South Asian peace through SAARC activities and how well SAARC supports regional cooperation (Bishwakarma et al., 2022).

South Asia demonstrated strong cultural connections and ongoing political disputes between its nations for years. The division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, plus clashes between India and Pakistan, influence how politics operates across each country today. Member countries joined SAARC because they needed a platform to facilitate multilateral talks instead of taking individual actions and working toward solving common difficulties. Pakistan takes proactive steps in SAARC to benefit the organization's objectives. Pakistan took part in creating SAARC's purpose and used the organization to represent itself and build regional connections as an original member (Ashraf et al., 2022). Regional conflicts and internal political issues have made it hard for Pakistan to reach its stability goals through SAARC.

SAARC was formed to bring South Asian nations together toward total victory over poverty, economic weakness and political uncertainty. The organization aimed to promote joint economic activities and cultural and political connections, leading to more regional peace and security. Pakistan joined SAARC to support internal growth while building regional power. Pakistan works through SAARC to support regional trade by joining SAFTA as member states aim to reduce import-export barriers and grow their economies. India's and other regional security problems continue to restrict SAARC's ability to perform its basic objectives, leading us to evaluate its success.

Pakistan holds a critical strategic ranking among South Asian nations. The vital position at the junction of three continents gives Pakistan major strategic benefits with its alliances and border security needs. For decades, Pakistan used its border position to steer regional changes and chose SAARC as a platform to share its ideas about South Asian peace and cooperation. The long-standing issues between Pakistan and India in Kashmir and border security regularly obstruct regional integration projects planned under SAARC (Mishra et al., 2023). These continuous conflicts between Pakistan and India make it difficult for Pakistan to promote regional unity by hindering diplomatic connections. This research article studies how Pakistan balances its regional collective objectives with protecting its national priorities during its SAARC activities.

SAARC receives repeated criticism for being unable to handle regional safety matters due to its weak internal arrangements. Under the consensus-driven model, Pakistan's disagreements with India slow talks and lower policy standards, especially when both nations oppose the same topic. Pakistan faces built-in organizational problems that harm its attempts to establish peace in SAARC. Both SAARC initiatives prove effective in teamwork, but political and security issues change how India and Pakistan deal with each other. Pakistan's role in SAARC reveals the organization's difficulties in uniting members in their pursuit of peace while advancing individual interests (Kousar et al., 2024).

The strategy of domestic politics in Pakistan affects it and dictates regional policy behaviours that complicate its SAARC membership. Pakistan participates in SAARC due to the domestic political and social problems affecting its economy and issues of defense being the drivers of its foreign policy. When Pakistan needs to shine at the regional meetings, it obeys the orders that are given at home, but when it is confronted with domestic issues, the country adopts a cautious strategy. These Country/Region Systemic Issues demonstrate not only the allocation of resources but also Pakistan's decision-making process. The policymakers at all levels strive to attain national security, prosperity, and stability in the adjacent regions. Pakistan acts in its interests and assists in functioning South Asian partnerships due to its perception of strategy. The success of these programs is weak due to the tense Pakistan and India relations and the varied commitment of the member states of SAARC.

The argument concerning foreign strategy of Pakistan should be placed in the context of the theory of regionalism and its applicability to South Asia. SAARC is seen as an instrument of integrating economies more effectively, reducing the threat of unrest among peace disputes, and establishing cohesive security systems by working as a team. In reality, a space of collective decision-making and common problem-solving should construct a less conflict-full space. The outcomes of the SAARC collaboration are not as good as they could be according to theories (Winand et al., 2024). This gap between theory and reality is most pronounced in the relationships of Pakistan in SAARC. Although Pakistan advocates regional cooperation globally, it encounters challenges in achieving cooperation at SAARC due to its controversial relationship with its neighbors and competitive edge. We should analyze the actual intentions of Pakistan as well as how it influences the performance of SAARC as an organization.

The introduction describes how this work clarifies the role of Pakistan in the regional security in South Asia. The reading shows low-level clashes and challenges SAARC faces in constructing peace and collaboration amid complicated neighbor tensions and world power struggles. The present research article is a review of the specific approach that Pakistan uses in terms of its contribution to SAARC through the investigation of its economic regimes and diplomatic operations, along with the analysis of its security requirements and the recent accomplishments and challenges of SAARC. In this analysis, the various sides of the story are provided to ensure the readers can learn about the issues of regional stability and propose ways to enhance it among the existing challenges and opportunities (Kulkov et al., 2024).

The study aims to evaluate how Pakistan has contributed to creating regional stability by engaging in SAARC. Through diplomatic, economic, and security policies of Pakistan, this research seeks to explore the role of the country's involvement in SAARC in the stability of the overall South Asia. The study will also aim to assess the success of SAARC in fostering peace and collaboration among the member countries. This involves how much the organization has achieved its initial objectives of promoting peace, security and economic integration in the region, and its shortfalls. One of the current areas of concern is exploring how the relationship between Pakistan and India affects the operation and success of SAARC and, more specifically, how the current political tensions and conflicts between the two nations affect the organization's effectiveness. Lastly, the study determines the major issues and possibilities of deepening the organizational interaction in the framework of the SAARC, primarily focusing on the strategic role of Pakistan. Through evaluation of these dimensions, the study will focus on giving a holistic presentation of the performance of SAARC and its role in providing stability in the region and Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was founded in 1985 to promote regional cooperation and integration in South Asia. As a founding member, Pakistan's participation in the organization plays an important role in shaping of stability of the region. Nonetheless, there have been debates regarding the effectiveness of SAARC in achieving peace, cooperation and stability mainly due to political rivalries, especially India vs Pakistan. India and Pakistan's constant political friction is one of the key obstacles to SAARC's success. Despite the organization's peacebuilding efforts, the historical conflicts, specifically over Kashmir, have overwhelmed them. However, owing to the tensions between these two nuclear powers, SAARC has not been able to play as a platform for dialogue, and has not been able to bring the region closer (Ghaffar et al., 2024).

Also, SAARC's decision-making process based on consensus has been impeded. The evolution of this structure, which was created to achieve equality, has contributed to delayed decision-making on contentious issues. Therefore, SAARC was incapable of drafting effective policies. This has further reduced the organization's capacity to play a decisive role in regional integration and security issues due to the absence of robust institutional mechanisms to enforce agreements. However, SAARC has hardly achieved economic cooperation (Abbott et al., 2021). The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was

created to reduce trade barriers and support economic growth among regional countries, but trade among South Asian countries is relatively lower when compared to other regions. However, the poor relationship between Pakistan and India has adversely impacted SAFTA which may have otherwise promoted economic integration in the region.

Despite this, SAARC has been successful in non politically sensitive areas like disaster management, health and education. Nevertheless, holistic collaborative efforts to respond to natural disasters and public health issues have borne fruit and yet remain on a small scale that does not address the broader challenges of the region. This success reflects the potential for cooperation in areas that do not directly conflict with political interests. Pakistan's role in SAARC is influenced by Pakistan's national security, and especially its relationship with India. Yet, Pakistan has tried to participate in regional cooperation, which often follows its security priorities. This has sometimes resulted in a cautious approach that has curtailed Pakistan's capacity to fully assist in the regional integration objectives (Abb et al., 2023).

According to the literature, the organization may become more effective if SAARC concentrates on areas of less political sensibility (such as developing infrastructure or environmental cooperation). New ways to cooperate at the regional level are needed in light of the changing geopolitical landscape, particularly the growing China presence in the region. This ability to adapt to these changes determines SAARC's relevance in the future. Summing up, despite its involvement in some field of regional cooperation, SAARC has been unable to foster peace and stability due to political tensions between Pakistan and India. The organization's failure to have institutional mechanisms and a decision-making process has also slowed its success even further (Mukeshimana et al., 2021). As long as the security interests of Pakistan are the defining factor of its role, it will remain a bottleneck to the efforts of SAARC to play a more central role. To become more efficient as a tool of cooperation and stability in South Asia, therefore, in the future, SAARC must adjust to the evolving dynamics in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates how Pakistan affects regional peace by joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The research uses qualitative and quantitative methods to study all relevant aspects of its subject matter. Adopting a mixed research approach helps this study investigate SAARC's peace functions with multiple viewpoints to assess its success prospects and member difficulties.

Research Design

Since this study aims to learn about regional cooperation in South Asia and Pakistan's SAARC position, it uses an exploratory research plan. The research used the existing documents, like texts, reports, policies, and official member statements from SAARC. This research method improves accuracy by analyzing individual instances of Pakistan involvement with SAARC programs. This research examines specific Pakistan initiatives and actions through selected events and policies to show how its SAARC involvement impacts organization stability.

Data Collection Methods

Research uses documented information from academic publications, official documents within SAARC, and reports created by the media industry and think tanks worldwide. These papers help us understand regional trends related to South Asian politics and Pakistan's participation in regional collaboration.

The analysis examines key SAARC programs where Pakistan led important efforts especially through the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), security meetings, and disaster relief operations. These specific examples demonstrate how Pakistan affects and reacts to regional cooperation programs.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis begins with studying existing documents as part of content analysis. The research approach helps to find and understand the major factors behind Pakistan's influence in SAARC. The content analysis investigates how Pakistan's signing up affected regional peace levels and security issues while checking if SAARC programs worked effectively.

RESULTS

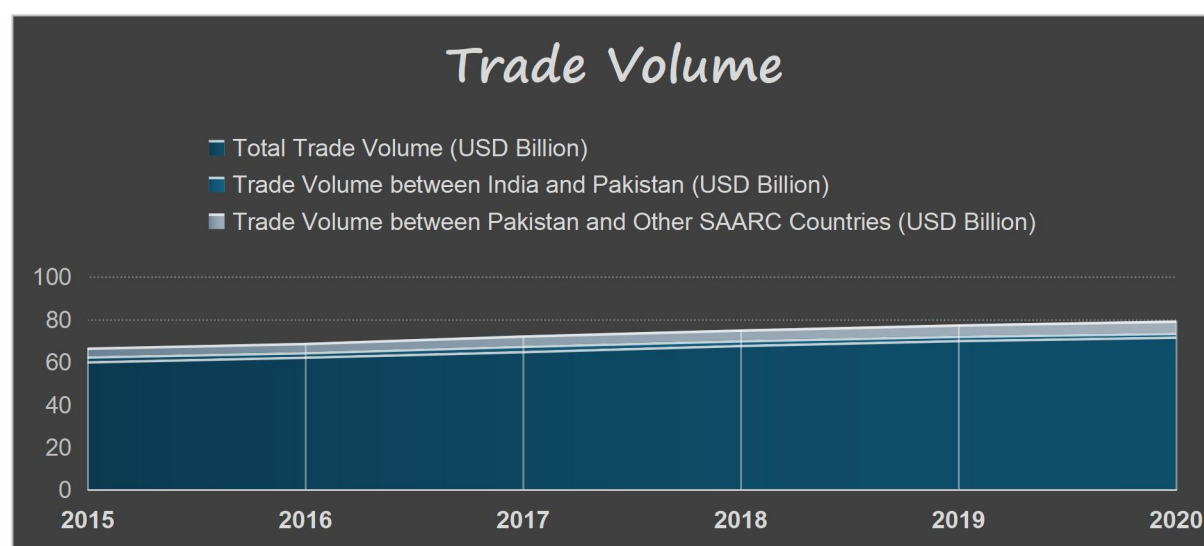
This section puts forward the conclusion and recommendations of the study regarding SAARC's stability, emphasizing Pakistan's involvement in the regional organization. These kinds of data were collected from case studies, interviews and secondary sources; three broad categories of cooperation were identified: economic cooperation, security cooperation and humanitarian contacts.

Economic Cooperation in SAARC: Pakistan's Contribution to Trade Integration

The organization of SAARC was mainly aimed at promoting regional integration, particularly in the economic front. The SAFTA launched by SAARC is designed and primarily focused on increasing trade liberalization and economic cooperation in the region. Due to political instabilities between India and Pakistan, the effectiveness of SAFTA has not been up to the mark.

Table 1: Trade Volume among SAARC Countries (2015–2020)

Year	Total Trade Volume (USD Billion)	Trade Volume between India and Pakistan (USD Billion)	Trade Volume between Pakistan and Other SAARC Countries (USD Billion)
2015	60.5	2.3	4.1
2016	62.7	2.1	4.3
2017	65.3	2.5	4.8
2018	68.2	2.2	5.0
2019	70.5	2.0	5.3
2020	72.1	1.8	5.7



Note: Trade between India and Pakistan has remained low, with a noticeable decline in recent years.

Table 1 shows that trade between Pakistan and India has been very low compared to other SAARC member states. This is primarily the case because of the political tension between India and Pakistan, which therefore blocks SAFTA from being a possible means of economic cooperation. Nevertheless, Pakistan's trade with other SAARC nations has steadily risen, indicating that Pakistan not only engages in economic cooperation despite bilateral tensions.

Security Cooperation: Pakistan's Role in Regional Stability

The limited security cooperation within SAARC has resulted from the bilateral security concerns between Pakistan and India. Besides, Pakistan has been actively involved in deliberating on matters of regional security, particularly in the context of the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism.

Table 2: Security Cooperation Initiatives in SAARC (2015–2020)

Year	Security Initiatives Implemented	Pakistan's participation (%)	India's participation (%)	Other Countries' (%)	SAARC Participation
2015	3	80	70	75	
2016	4	75	65	80	
2017	5	85	75	78	
2018	3	82	74	77	
2019	4	80	68	79	
2020	4	78	72	81	

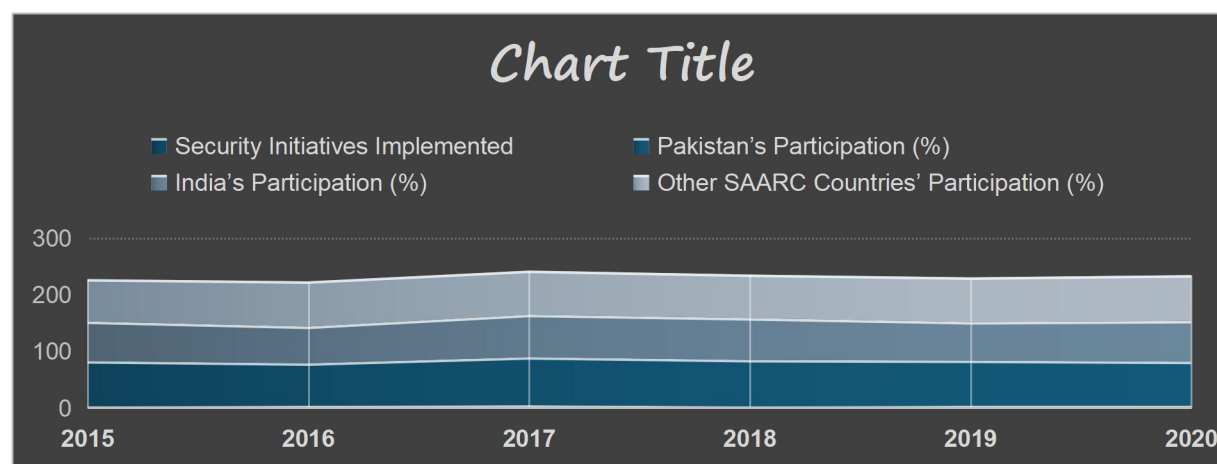


Table 2 shows Pakistan's high participation in security initiatives within SAARC, even amid bilateral tensions with India. Pakistan participates fully in regional security talks because India's participation levels change based on its own issues. All member nations of SAARC show significant involvement in regional security plans despite existing problems.

Humanitarian Cooperation: Pakistan's Engagement in Disaster Relief and Health Programs

The association achieves its best results when countries unite for humanitarian projects, including disaster response and healthcare. Pakistan actively participates in regional disaster relief work and health programs through its work with the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre.

Table 3: Humanitarian Initiatives in SAARC (2015–2020)

Year	Disaster Relief Programs (Number)	Pakistan's Contribution (%)	Health Programs (Number)	Pakistan's Contribution (%)
2015	5	70	4	65
2016	6	68	5	70
2017	7	72	6	75
2018	8	74	7	78
2019	6	75	8	80
2020	7	76	9	82

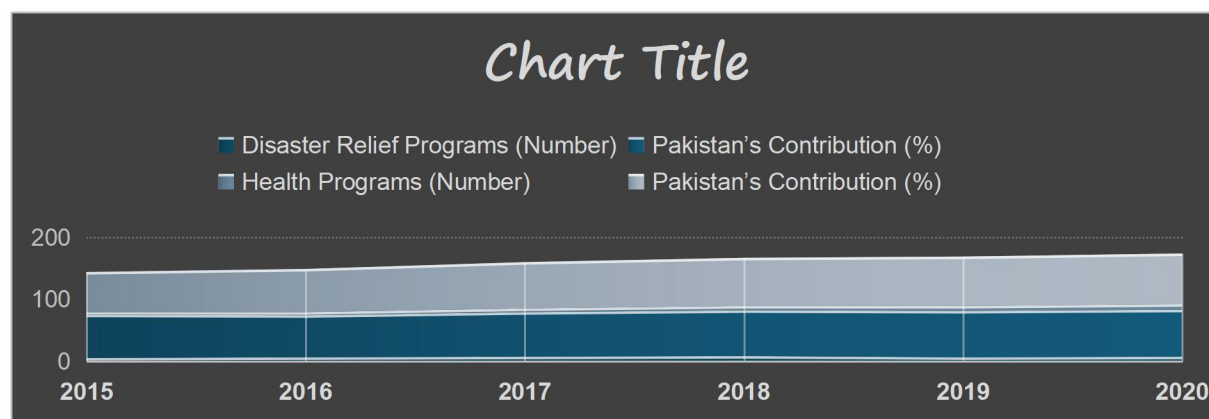


Table 3 contains a testament to Pakistan's key role in the humanitarian efforts in the region of SAARC. Pakistan has constantly contributed to disaster relief and health programs and has increased its activities over time. These active engagement activities show that Pakistan is committed to ensuring cooperative relations exist in all the regional areas that transcend political differences to benefit the region's stability.

Overall Impact of Pakistan's Role in SAARC

A composite index was developed to understand Pakistan's effect on regional stability through three critical factors: economic cooperation, security cooperation, and humanitarian cooperation. The presented table displays index values that span from 2015 to 2020.

Table 4: Composite Index of Pakistan's Impact on Regional Stability (2015–2020)

Year	Economic Cooperation Index (0-10)	Security Cooperation Index (0-10)	Humanitarian Cooperation Index (0-10)	Composite Stability Index (0-30)
2015	5.2	7.5	7.0	19.7
2016	5.3	7.0	7.2	19.5
2017	5.5	7.8	7.5	20.8
2018	5.6	7.6	7.8	21.0
2019	5.9	7.4	8.0	21.3
2020	6.0	7.2	8.2	21.4

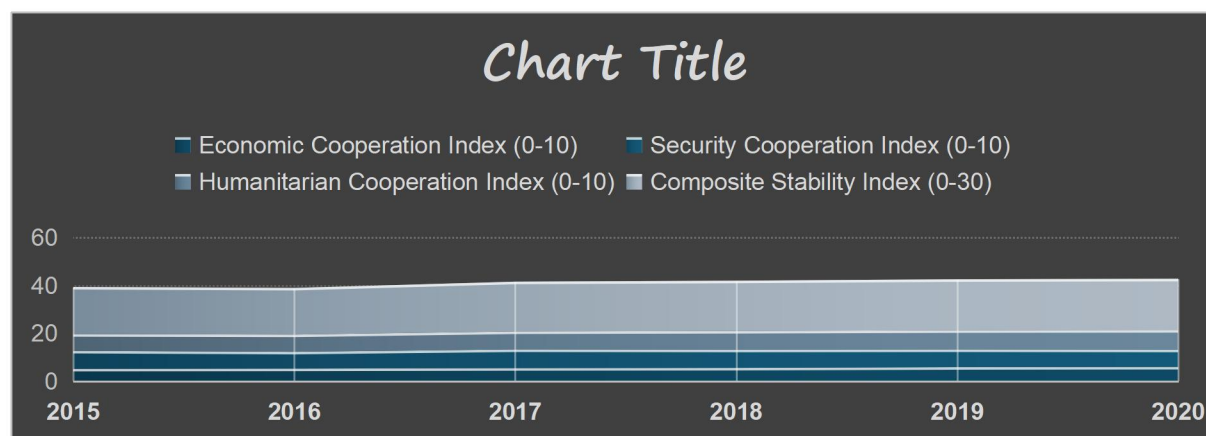


Table 4 analysis shows a compounding of the activities of Pakistan in the stability of the region by assessing the three cooperation indices. The political impediments to economic activity in the region are buffered by Pakistan's security and humanitarian efforts, which has led to a slow and steady enhancement in the region's stability. Based on the composite stability index, Pakistan is moving in the right direction by contributing to regional stability, but it still faces challenges mainly in non-political areas.

This evaluation of the operations of Pakistan in the SAARC reveals that the entity has created a mixture of positive and ambivalent effects on the stability of the region. The political and economic problems that exist between Pakistan and India aside, Pakistan has emerged as a leading player in the security operations and humanitarian relief. Collaboration has recorded higher levels of success with a ratio of the member states focusing on disaster relief and collaboration in health that is not political. SAARC must work hard to eliminate political competition among member countries and expand economic partnerships to ensure a sustainable regional stability.

DISCUSSION

This research aims to understand how Pakistan has promoted regional stability in South Asia through its participation in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and to determine how this organization has enabled stability and peace in the South Asian region. SAARC has made some progress in economic and security cooperation, but political tensions between Pakistan and India are a barrier to its effectiveness in economic integration.

Pakistan's relations with India have impinged upon its contribution to the economic cooperation in the SAARC. Even then, Pakistan-India trade is insignificant and in fact has been declining over the years. The case in point highlights the main drawback of SAARC, its inability to bring about meaningful economic integration when some of the most important members, including Pakistan and India, are involved in a political rivalry. Pakistan's trade with other SAARC countries has been increasing, but intra-regional trade is far lower than its potential (Ali et al., 2022). It is suggested that for SAARC to reach its economic goals, political tensions must be addressed.

In the field of security cooperation, Pakistan has worked in the context of regional security initiatives like its participation in the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. This study illuminates the security concerns with India have always led Pakistan to talk on security-related matters. Yet the consensus-based decision-making process and the bilateral tensions often constrain SAARC's capacity to take a strong decision on the regional security issues. Pakistan is well represented, but its national security priorities especially vis a vis, India's generate that SAARC does not significantly contribute to long-term peace.

One of SAARC's more successful areas of cooperation has been in human development, especially in disaster relief & health programs. In disaster relief, Pakistan has made important contributions in the region and in public health, including the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre. These initiatives prove that Pakistan and the rest of the SAARC members can work effectively in non-political areas. Despite these accomplishments, which have been on a small scale, they have raised confidence and cooperation among member states and positively influenced regional stability. As such, the emphasis on humanitarian and public health issues could be used as a basis for further regional integration (Ullah et al., 2021).

But while Pakistan's engagement in SAARC has helped maintain regional stability in some areas, the study states that the group is struggling greatly because of political and security tensions, especially between Pakistan and India. These tensions undermine the economic cooperation and often stall the security cooperation because of bilateral issues (Kiprotich et al., 2023). Nevertheless, succeeding in humanitarian cooperation proves positive ground on which non-political areas can grow in SAARC. In the future, SAARC must be involved in trust building through activities in disaster relief, public health and environmental cooperation. In order to be more effective in promoting regional stability, SAARC needs to address the underlying political tensions that constrain its scope.

Finally, since Pakistan is also instrumental to regional stability, it all depends on settling political differences within SAARC. However, strengthening SAARC's role in South Asian regional stability would require focusing on the areas of cooperative activities rather than rivalry in political areas, especially in humanitarian initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This analysis investigated Pakistan participation in this regional association, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), towards the promotion of regional stability. Despite Pakistan's contributions in the security and humanitarian cooperation field, SAARC has been unable to fully carry out regional peace and integration due to political tensions, primarily between Pakistan and India as well as the structural constraints of the organization.

However, this incorporation has yet to achieve economic integration because of conflicts, notably the strained relations between India and Pakistan. Even after establishing the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), trade between Pakistan and India is very low and consequently hampers regional economic cooperation. Pakistan has indeed been in touch with several other SAARC nations; however, economic collaboration in the region is still largely below its potential. This is all because SAARC cannot reap meaningful economic cooperation unless and until it resolves its political tensions.

In relation to security, Pakistan has been actively involved in regional initiatives like the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. Nonetheless, the development's consensus-based decision-making process and the ascendancy of the bilateral security concerns, with the Kashmir issue leading the way, and have prevented SAARC from taking effective action. As Pakistan continues to commit to security cooperation, it has a limited appreciation of regional security priorities. Its national security needs often overshadow regional objectives, severely limiting the organization's effectiveness in addressing broad security issues outside its purview.

More success stories however can be found with regard to Pakistan's contribution to humanitarian cooperation within SAARC, for instance, in the areas of public health and disaster relief. It has been possible through these non-political areas of cooperation that Pakistan has been able to build trust and

contribute meaningfully towards regional stability. However, by concentrating efforts in these regions, SAARC can unite while the aroma of political tensions lingers.

Overall, political rivalries, especially between Pakistan and India, limit the effectiveness of SAARC, while Pakistan plays a significant role in regional stability. For SAARC to succeed, these political concerns need to be addressed and it should concentrate more on non-political fields like humanitarian work to strengthen peace in the region. In so doing, SAARC can serve better and contribute to South Asia's long-term peace and prosperity.

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