

The people of South Asia had suffered because of missed opportunities for regional development, connectivity, and cooperation. Evaluate the performance of SAARC in the light of this statement.

ANSWER

① INTRODUCTION

SAARC was established as a regional platform in South Asia to establish economic, social, political, and cultural ties among the member states. Bangladesh was the founding member and a SAARC Charter was created by the consensus of all participating members. However, this is the least integrated region in the world, with 5% intra-regional trade. The dominance of India, regional rivalries, and a dysfunctional secretariat have not allowed it to emerge as a successful forum like ASEAN. The people have suffered the actual casualty i.e. development, connectivity and cooperation are still elusive due to SAARC's dormancy from 2014 onwards.

② SAARC Missed Opportunities

(a) Dysfunctional SAARC secretariat

SAARC secretariat is not an autonomous body with no financial powers. There are no specialised agencies under it for trade, climate change, hydro-politics and other areas of significance. Like ASEAN secretariat, it did not live up to its potential.

(b) Below-Potential Intra-SAARC Trade

Despite being the ^{one of the} largest economies in South Asia, India does not open its markets for other member states. It exports goods and services to other member states worth \$2.74 bn, much below its potential. It could have driven the region to new economic heights. However, member countries do not look for points of convergence.

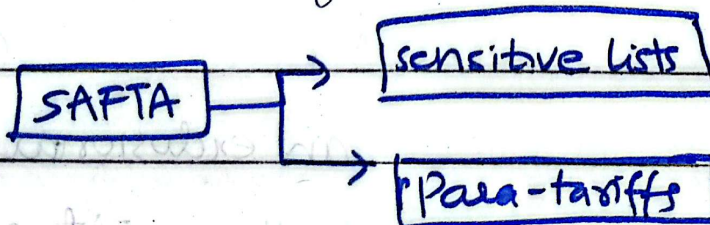
(8) Political Regional Rivalries

The regional politically-motivated rivalries have sapped the potential of SAARC as a socio-economic hub.

The Pakistan-India political tensions after 2016 Uri attack, along with India-Bangladesh hydro-politics have made SAARC dysfunctional since 2016.

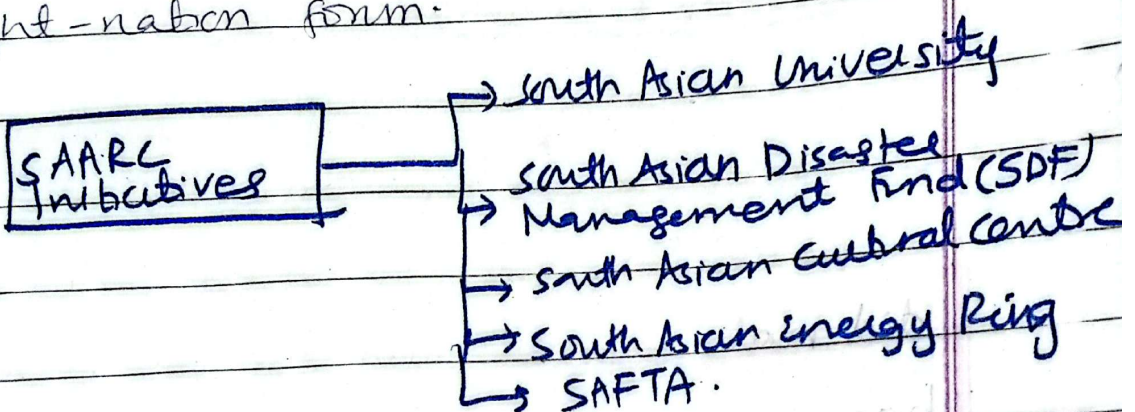
(9) Delayed Economic Reforms

There are various economic agreements under SAARC which have not been implemented yet. For instance, SAPTA did not improve intra-regional trade because of heightened non-tariff barriers among the member states.



(e) Issues of Low-Politics Ignored

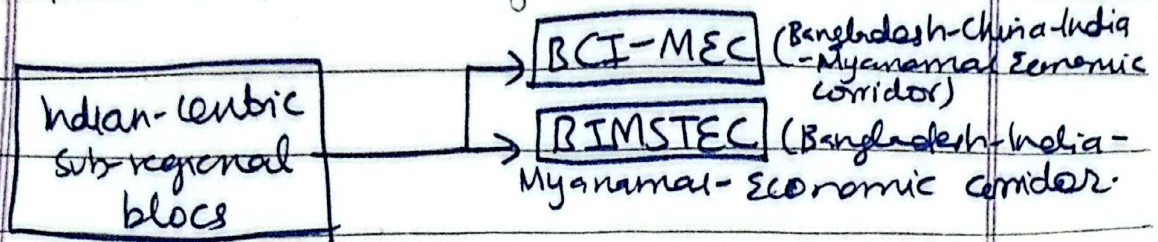
SAARC is dysfunctional more by design than by default. It does not allow countries to resolve their bilateral issues. Rather, it overfocuses on high-politics issues of multilateral nature. Thus, it has missed the opportunity to promote bilateralism and regionalism under this eight-nation forum.



(F) Misplaced Sub-Regional Initiatives

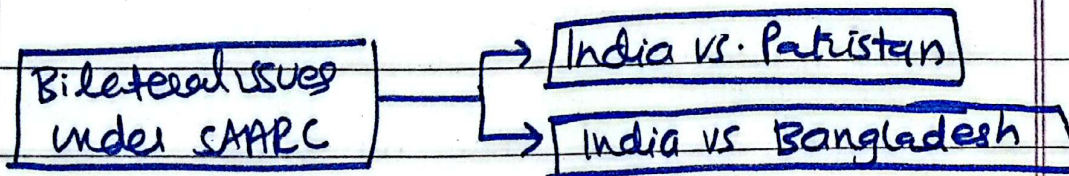
The sub-regional initiatives outside of SAARC are promoting an exclusionary tactic which is against the spirit of multilateralism under SAARC.

India's initiatives like BCI-MEC and BIMSTEC are excluding Pakistan from the ^{Sub-}regional networks.

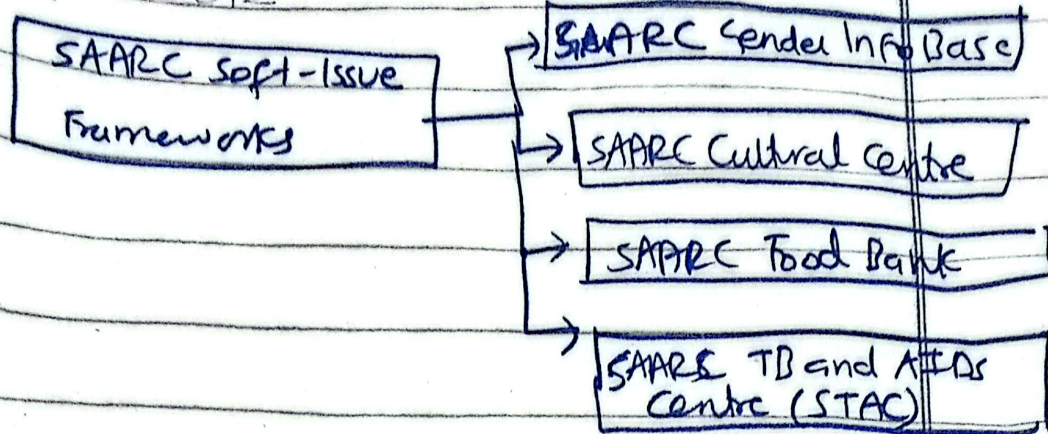


(ii) Bypassing Regional Rivalries

Since the SAARC charter 1985 itself prevents countries from resolving their bilateral issues, the forum bypasses regional rivalries instead of resolving them. The 2016 Summit in Islamabad was boycotted by India on the pretext of Uri attack. However, no SAARC summit has discussed this issue, let alone resolve it.



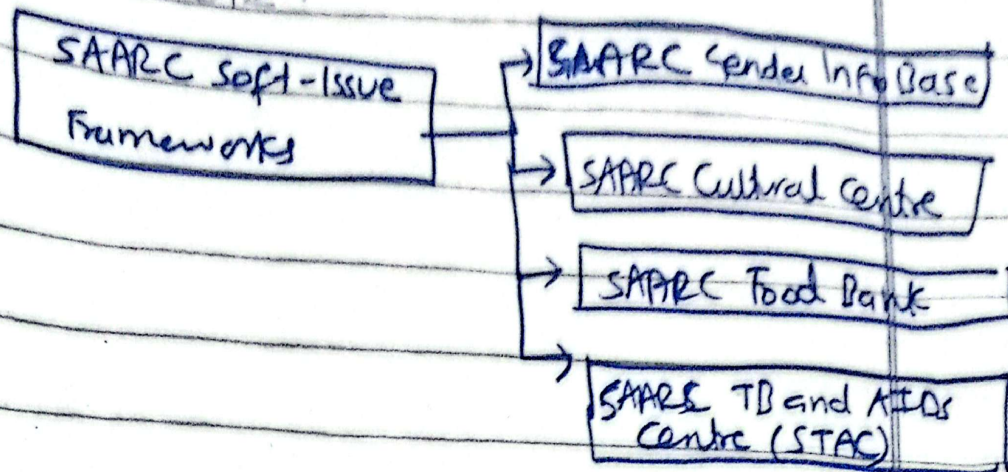
modelled on UN SDGs to improve health, education, poverty, but have no monitoring mechanisms after 2012.



(J) No Erasmus-like Exchange Program

In social and developmental contexts, SAARC has underplayed its critical role. Despite having a SAARC cultural centre, there is no erasmus-like SAARC-wide educational exchange program to circulate a talent pool across the south Asian states.

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(K) Gaps in Anti-Terrorism Frameworks

Anti-terrorism cooperation has become hostage of geopolitics under SAARC. India and Pakistan, particularly, do not have consensus on definition of 'terrorism'. Moreover, political distrust has prevented them to share intelligence information. Also, there is no binding enforcement mechanisms under anti-terrorism frameworks.

"STOMD (SAARC Terrorist offences Monitoring Desk) is still dysfunctional since 1995." —

(L) Critical Analysis

SAARC, despite its missed opportunities, should not be replaced but revived in true letter and spirit. Its successes, though limited, range from its regional

Integration frameworks, SAFTA boasting intra-regional trade, and different cultural programs under it, have added to regional development in economic, social, political, and cultural sectors.

Conclusion

Thus, it could be concluded in the end that SAARC as the first regional form of its kind has missed many opportunities in connectivity, cooperation, and development aspects. Its moribund intra-regional trade, limited institutional setups, non-binding SAARC charter in implementation, have undermined its soft diplomatic frameworks, too. However, it should be revived in the letter and spirit to spur regional-level cooperation like EU, and ASEAN.