

- Q SAARC stands at a crossroads amid emerging regional alliances such as BIMSTEC and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Critically evaluate the relevance and future prospects of SAARC in the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

Introduction:

SAARC was founded in 1985 to promote regional cooperation in South Asia, but today it faces credibility crisis as a rival groupings and great-power initiatives gain traction. Its relevance must be evaluated on five axes: strategic/political relevance, economic performance, institutional capacity, geo-strategic competition, and reform prospects. The following evaluation is concise, evidence-based and examines both SAARC's continuing strengths and the obstacles that determine its future trajectory.

① Strategic Relevance Is Eroding

② Bilateral Rivalries block regional Action:

Persistent India-Pakistan hostility has repeatedly paralysed SAARC's Summitry and practical work; the 2016 Islamabad Summit was

effectively cancelled after the Uri attacks, showing how bilateral security shocks shut down regional forums.

② Limited Crisis-Management role:

SAARC has no credible track record of managing cross-border crises or leading region-wide security initiatives, which reduces its strategic utility compared with alternative forums that pursue functional cooperation without political babbage.

③ Economic Performance Shows Missed Opportunities:

Economic opportunities

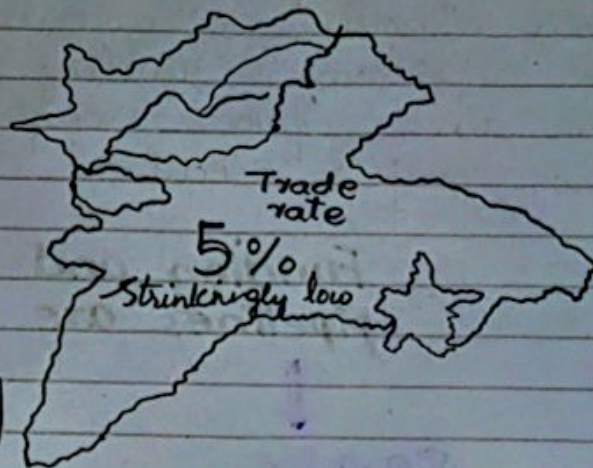
Negligible Intra-regional trade

Weak Delivery on region-wide projects

⑥

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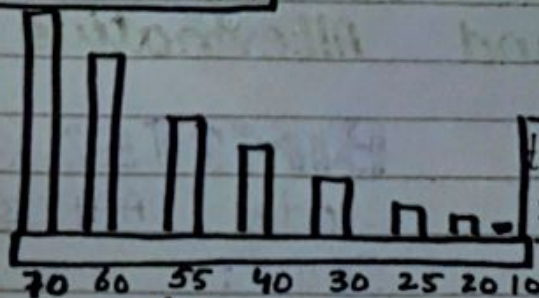
Trade within South Asia is strikingly low - only about 5% of members' total trade - far below other regional blocks and a clear symptom of missed connectivity and market integration.



South Asia

Weak Delivery on region-wide projects: Despite instruments such as SAFTA (2004) implementation of tariff liberalisation and transport facilitation has been slow; transport and customs bottlenecks continue to prevent the region from exploiting geographic proximity.

tariff liberalisation



transport facilitation



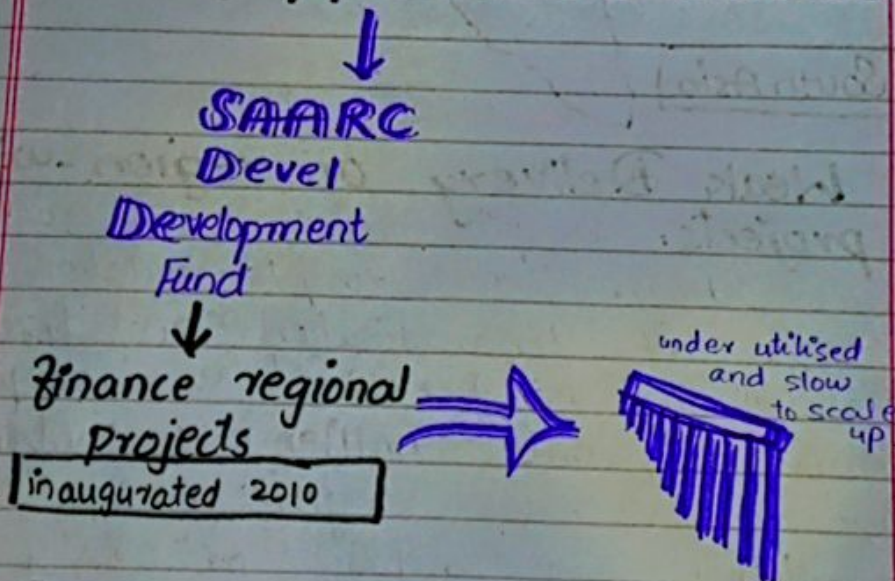
getting slower day by day

② Institutional Capacity is limited:

① Secretariat lacks teeth:

The SAARC Secretariate in Kathmandu is essentially a coordinating body without enforcement powers or sufficient funding; this constrains follow-through on agreements and project execution;

Funding and Project pipelines are underdeveloped



② Geo-Strategic Competition and Alternative Groupings:

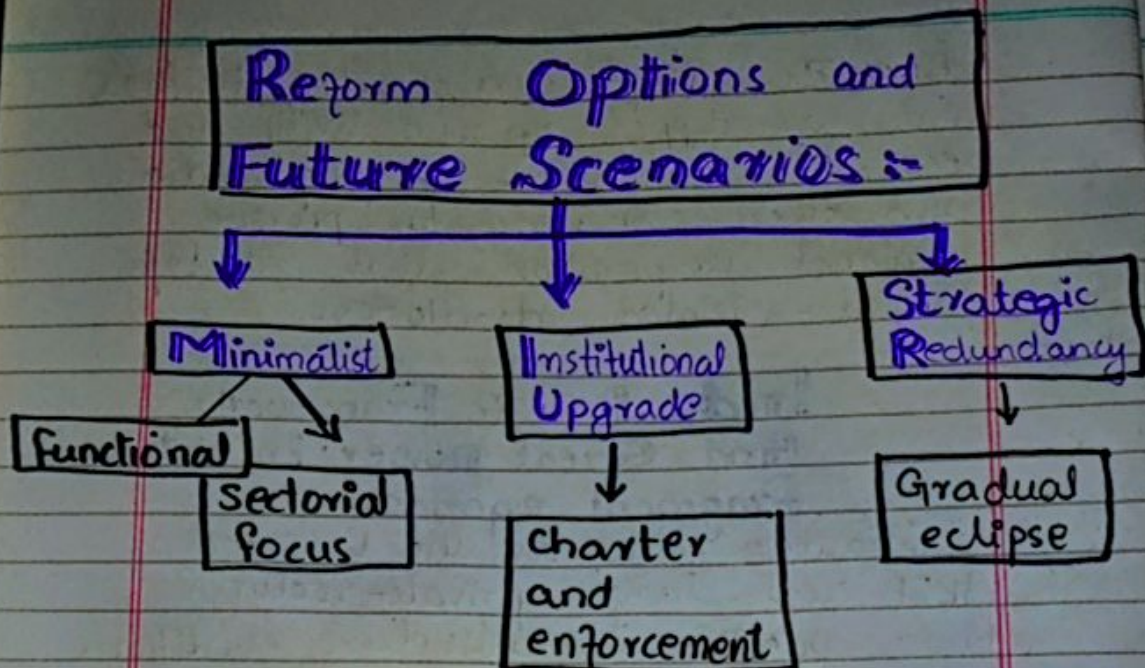
BIMSTEC's Revival erodes SAARC's functional space:

BIMISTEC adopted a charter in 2012 and has stepped up connectivity and economic initiatives, offering India and others a way to pursue regional cooperation that sidesteps Pakistan-related deadlocks.

Indo-Pacific Frameworks And Great Power Initiatives Fragment agendas.

Initiatives such as the U.S.-led IPEF and large private-sector Indo-Pacific infrastructure coalitions shift resources and political energy toward Indo-Pacific networks, narrowing the policy bandwidth available for SAARC-centric projects.

Bilateral mega-Projects (e.g., CPEC) change incentive structures. CPEC (China-Pakistan projects) and other bilateral corridors attract investment and strategic focus outside SAARC mechanisms, reinforcing the view that bilateral deals can deliver faster results than multilateral SAARC processes.



⑥ Implications For South Asia

If SAARC continues to stagnate, South Asia risks deepening inequality and strategic fragmentation. Smaller states will remain dependent on extra-regional powers, while people lose opportunities for shared growth, connectivity, and peace dividends. Conversely, a revived SAARC could strengthen collective bargaining, energy cooperation, and regional resilience against global shocks such as pandemics or climate disasters.

Conclusion:

SAARC today stands b/w irrelevance and reinvention. Its survival depends on transforming from a politically stalled forum into a practical platform for development and connectivity. The choice for South Asia's leaders is clear: persist in rivalry and remain divided, or embrace cooperative pragmatism for a stable and integrated future.