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# BIMSTEC IN LIEU OF SAARC

Not Exactly a Great Replacement

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# Introduction

The increasing attention given to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) opened a new debate as to whether BIMSTEC would replace the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This issue brief adds on to the debate by arguing that although BIMSTEC and SAARC are important for South Asia in their own right, SAARC is too important to be replaced by an organization that do not completely represent South Asia.

## SAARC

Before the wave of independence and formation of nation states in its contemporary definition in South Asia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Asia was arguably a single unit with fluid exchanges of goods, services, and ideas. The idea of formal regional organizations with legal underpinnings also originated at around the same time. Initially, regional organizations were defined in terms of the proximity of its member states. At the same time, their objectives would be all-encompassing – political, strategic, social, economic, and cultural. Ironically, for a region that was frequently identified as a single unit before the partition and formation of new nation-states, South Asia came to adopt this trend very late in 1985.

The oft-repeated accusation against the South Asian states in their capacities as the members of the SAARC was the mutual mistrust and suspicion. Unsurprisingly, like a foreboding, the very proposal of SAARC was viewed with the same mistrust and suspicion that was to linger around since then. When President Ziaur Rahman began lobbying for the formation of a regional organization since the late 1970s, he was met with scepticism from India and Pakistan. One account points out that India assumed it to be an attempt by the other South Asian states to

internationalize the many bilateral disputes between the member states<sup>1</sup> whereas another account argues that India saw SAARC as invitation of the Cold War politics to South Asia with SAARC being dominated by American influence<sup>2</sup>. Pakistan viewed SAARC as an Indian plan to assert its regional economic dominance and rally all the South Asian states against Pakistan<sup>3</sup>. After a series of diplomatic negotiations and consultations, all the South Asian states came around for the case and established the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation in 1983 during the summit of their foreign ministers held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The important point to note here is the fact that all the nations, including India and Pakistan, were able to put aside the suspicions and find a common ground to establish a formal organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad Jamshed. 2006. "SAARC: Origin, Growth, Potential and Achievements." *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture* 127-140.

<sup>2</sup> Murthy, Padmaja. 2008. "Relevance of SAARC." *Strategic Analysis* 1781-1796.

<sup>3</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad Jamshed. 2006. "SAARC: Origin, Growth, Potential and Achievements." *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture* 127-140.

The founding members of the SAARC are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan became the eighth member of SAARC in 2007. It was established as an organization for welfarist, economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific cooperation. Initially, the member-states identified five broad areas of regional cooperation: Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities<sup>4</sup>. Since then, SAARC went on to identify new areas of cooperation. Over the years, the SAARC effectively established an elaborate structural framework for cooperation spanning wide range of fields.

## BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), on the other hand, was founded in 1997 as an organization aimed at achieving a specific function. In this case, it was economic cooperation. It was initially christened as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand – Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC), clearly named after its member-states. When Myanmar joined the grouping in late 1997, its name was changed to Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Eventually, with the induction of Nepal and Bhutan, the grouping adopted its current form and diversified functionally to include technical cooperation in various fields in addition to economic

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<sup>4</sup> Jang Group Online. n.d. *History and Evolution of SAARC*. Accessed July 10, 2022. [https://web.archive.org/web/20131111092417/http://jang.com.pk/important\\_events/saarc\\_2004/history.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20131111092417/http://jang.com.pk/important_events/saarc_2004/history.html).

cooperation<sup>5</sup>. Although the BIMSTEC is often referred to as a regional organization, the author believes that it is more accurate to refer to it as an interregional organization. It was more of a means to connect South Asia with Southeast Asia, to adopt best practices, and ensure shared prosperity. In fact, BIMSTEC was more of a grouping than an organization until March 2022 when it adopted a formal organizational architecture in the form of the BIMSTEC Charter. Until now, it's working mechanism constituted Summits supposed to be held every two years, ministerial meetings of Foreign and Commerce Ministers of member countries for deciding on trade and economic affairs, supposed to be held once every year, an operational meeting of senior officials to monitor the activities of the grouping to be held twice a year, and a coordinating body called the BIMSTEC Working Group which is supposed to review the progress of the regional grouping every once every month<sup>6</sup>.

## Shortcomings of SAARC

According to several analysts, SAARC has been in a deadlock for the past few years. Truly, there had been several developments or lack thereof that have created roadblocks for the functioning of SAARC. Although wide ranging agreements have been signed and numerous institutional structures have been established, they were not fully implemented, or more accurately, exploited

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<sup>5</sup> Munjal, Diksha. 2022. "Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant?" *The Hindu*. April 6. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>.

<sup>6</sup> Munjal, Diksha. 2022. "Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant?" *The Hindu*. April 6. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>.

to their fullest potential. For instance, the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), arguably one of the most successful outcomes of SAARC negotiations, is yet to be fully implemented.

If one goes beyond the poor implementation of the programs, the blame for the malfunction of SAARC falls on the suspicion and the lack of trust among the member states. The smaller countries perceive and blame India to be projecting a “big brother” image. Often, bilateral issues between member states are projected onto the platform. The prominent culprits in this case are India and Pakistan. One terrorist attack and a nearly prepared Summit gets postponed or cancelled or either India or Pakistan would back out. The 19<sup>th</sup> Summit of SAARC was decided to be held in November 2016. However, in the event of the 2016 Uri terrorist attacks, India refused to participate in the Summit resulting in its postponement<sup>7</sup>. Non-cooperation between countries is another issue. For instance, Pakistan regularly objects to proposals by India like SAARC-MVA and the SAARC satellite project.

There are structural deficiencies as well. Decisions must always be taken in unanimity. This has the effect of slowing down the decision-making processes. Bilateral issues must not be taken up within the platform. The contradiction is that apparently, displeasure arising out of bilateral issues can be expressed through the SAARC platform. SAARC lacks any form of dispute settlement or conflict mediation mechanisms. Also, the countries in this region are highly embroiled in bilateral relations with each other that they give primacy and importance to them over their intra-regional multilateral relations. In their defence, bilateralism seems like a much easier way to get things done given the deadlocks in SAARC. SAARC also faces the problem of shortage of resources and

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<sup>7</sup> Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. 2022. "No consensus on holding SAARC Summit: India." *The Economic Times*. January 07. Accessed July 11, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/no-consensus-on-holding-saarc-summit-india/articleshow/88747272.cms?from=mdr>.

absence of adequate enforcement and monitoring mechanisms<sup>8</sup>. Timely delivery of projects is an important issue of concern. Getting through red tapes, especially those in India, is a very time-consuming task. As a result, the delivery of several projects has been delayed.

Because of all these factors, SAARC has been a victim of organizational disfunction.

## **Is BIMSTEC better than SAARC?**

When compared to SAARC, BIMSTEC seemingly offers a viable alternative for continuing regional cooperation. There are no significant bilateral issues between the member states. Therefore, the proceedings at BIMSTEC tend to happen more smoothly. The presence of Thailand as a member of BIMSTEC in addition to India helps quell the fears of smaller nations that any one nation tries to impose its dominance over them. For SAARC, states like India and Pakistan had to be lobbied to join the organization. Whereas in the case of BIMSTEC, states were self-motivated to form the grouping. For India, BIMSTEC was a thrust for India's Look East Policy (which later evolved into the Act East Policy). BIMSTEC was viewed as a vehicle to bring about development to the North-eastern states of India through engagement with the fast-growing economies of Southeast Asia. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan have similar interests. At the same time, BIMSTEC provides an action platform for Thailand's Look West Policy.

Although BIMSTEC had been around since 1997, it came to limelight when Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited the members of the BIMSTEC for his second swearing-in ceremony to the

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<sup>8</sup> Bhattacharjee, Joyeeta. 2018. "SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The search for the ideal platform for regional cooperation." *ORF Online*. January 23. Accessed July 12, 2022. [https://www.orfonline.org/research/saarc-vs-bimstec-the-search-for-the-ideal-platform-for-regional-cooperation/#\\_ednref7](https://www.orfonline.org/research/saarc-vs-bimstec-the-search-for-the-ideal-platform-for-regional-cooperation/#_ednref7).



Office of the Prime Minister in India in 2019. The potential of BIMSTEC as a replacement for SAARC became a topic of discussion when BIMSTEC adopted its formal legal architecture in March 2022. India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, even commented that BIMSTEC offers a viable regional alternative as SAARC faces uncertainty over how to deal with terrorism, connectivity, and trade issues.

But is BIMSTEC a replacement for SAARC? This paper argues that even though BIMSTEC may be a temporarily comfortable fallback position, BIMSTEC can never replace SAARC. BIMSTEC serves an altogether different purpose and therefore, can never take the place of SAARC.

“BIMSTEC and SAARC are two separate regional organizations of which India is a member.” This was the response of V. Muraleedharan when he was asked whether BIMSTEC can be an alternative to the SAARC during the Parliament Q&A section in March 2020. He also went on to reiterate the differences in composition, purpose, and regional relevance of both the organizations<sup>9</sup>. BIMSTEC and SAARC are two organizations of which Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are members. These are the only commonalities between SAARC and BIMSTEC.

However, the difference is huge simply because of the fact that SAARC is a regional organization whereas BIMSTEC was instituted as an interregional organization. Although the charter of both the organizations gives priority to cooperation in various fields to ensue shared prosperity, one can infer that the primary objective of SAARC was peace by cooperation through connectivity and culture whereas that of BIMSTEC was development by connectivity through cooperation and culture. SAARC is about bring the countries of South Asia together as a tide that is meant to rise all the boats in the region. True, BIMSTEC also aims for just that, but BIMSTEC is more about

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<sup>9</sup> Muraleedharan, V. 2020. *QUESTION NO.2118 BIMSTEC AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SAARC*. March 12. Accessed July 13, 2022. <https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/32520/QUESTION+NO2118+BIMSTEC+AS+AN+ALTERNATIVE+TO+SAARC>

connecting the regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the developing countries of South Asia and the fast-growing economies of Southeast Asia.

This paper argue that the analysts are giving too much weight to the challenges of SAARC through the lens of India-Pakistan rivalry that they are overlooking the shortcomings of BIMSTEC. Just like SAARC, BIMSTEC also faces the problem of timely delivery of projects even without any case of rivalries like the India-Pakistan issues. The Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project, and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway are two projects India has taken up under BIMSTEC in 2008 and 2018 respectively. These are yet to be completed. When overwhelming attention is paid to a few cases of postponed or cancelled SAARC Summits, the analysts conveniently forget the fact that since the inception of BIMSTEC in 1997, it has only held four Summits until the time of the writing. In comparison, SAARC has held 18 Summits until now and talks are happening for the next Summit. BIMSTEC has agreed to establish its own Free Trade Agreement (FTA), but it is yet to be adopted. BIMSTEC also faces the issue of resource crunch.

Postponement or cancellation of meetings are a common language in international relations wherein nations express their displeasure in the actions of the others. One should not conclude such instances as a shortcoming or worst, beginning of the end of SAARC but rather as a natural and human way of dealing with issues by a living and breathing organization. If the onus for the disfunction of SAARC is on the conflictual relation between India and Pakistan, then how come the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) works so effectively. It brings together two of India’s archnemesis – China and Pakistan.

## Significance of SAARC

In many ways, SAARC is way more important for South Asia than BIMSTEC.

While SAARC is about South Asia, BIMSTEC, according to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, features within the larger Asia-Pacific region. Logically, the potential wins for the member countries may be higher from cooperation through the BIMSTEC platform because of the

relatively smoother bilateral and multilateral relations between the countries as well as because of the cooperation with fast-growing economies and enormous markets. But if the oft-repeated liberal argument that peace can be achieved through cooperation is true, then the importance to SAARC to South Asia is on a wholly different level. This must be approached through the lens of traditional and non-traditional security threats which the South Asian nations are facing, and the list is huge. This includes cross-border terrorism, border disputes, environmental threats, and maritime challenges in addition to the economic challenges.

These security issues originate largely from within South Asia. SAARC provides a singular and common platform for the stakeholder nations of South Asia to come together to find solutions. Because BIMSTEC is framed within the larger Indo-Pacific context, it is highly likely to get embroiled in the international power politics and security issues associated with the Indo-Pacific. Many analysts look at BIMSTEC as India's doorway to gain trade and security prominence in that region<sup>10</sup>. SAARC hosts 1.87 billion people and a combined GDP of USD 3.954 trillion<sup>11</sup> whereas BIMSTEC brings together 1.67 billion people and a combined GDP of USD 3.697 trillion per year<sup>12</sup>. Not only does SAARC hosts more people than BIMSTEC, but SAARC also has a combined

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<sup>10</sup> Munjal, Diksha. 2022. "Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant?" *The Hindu*. April 6. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>.

<sup>11</sup> countryeconomy.com. 2022. *SAARC - South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation*. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/groups/south-asian-association-regional-cooperation>.

<sup>12</sup> Munjal, Diksha. 2022. "Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant?" *The Hindu*. April 6. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>.

GDP greater than that of BIMSTEC. The potential of SAARC and population benefitting from its architecture is much higher.

Afghanistan joined SAARC as its eighth member in 2007. Afghanistan is South Asia's connecting link to Central Asia. With the herculean changes happening in Afghanistan because of the regime change, it is more important now than ever for South Asia in general and India in particular to engage with the Taliban. Taliban's international relations are at its most dynamic stage, especially with respect to South Asian countries. A multilateral and exclusively South Asian forum could redirect the focus on Afghanistan-South Asia relations, lay the ground for resolving any form of long-standing issues, including bilateral ones and potentially help in bringing about harmonious relations. Apart from intergovernmental organizations at the global level, only SAARC brings together Afghanistan and all the South Asian countries. From this perspective, neglecting SAARC would be a literal blunder. SAARC presents India and Pakistan an opportunity to take steps in cooperating with each other. If reports of back-channel diplomacy between India and Pakistan<sup>13</sup> are true, one can conclude that there are indications of political will among the leadership for the normalization of relations. Since its inclusion in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list since 2018 on account of the state's connection with terrorism<sup>14</sup>, Pakistan has been striving to improve its international image. Such an attitude is reflected in its first ever National Security Policy published in January 2022 where it lists terrorism as one of the prominent

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<sup>13</sup> Ians. 2022. *India, Pakistan engage in 'back channel' talks to break stalemate: Report*. May 30. Accessed July 12, 2022. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-pakistan-engage-in-back-channel-talks-to-break-stalemate-report-122053000475\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-pakistan-engage-in-back-channel-talks-to-break-stalemate-report-122053000475_1.html).

<sup>14</sup> Singh, Rishika. 2022. June 15. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-is-the-fatfs-grey-list-and-could-pakistan-be-taken-off-it-at-last-7972088/>.

internal security challenges it is facing. It also calls for a “just and peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute” in the hope of achieving peaceful relations with India<sup>15</sup>. Clearly, there is hope for SAARC yet.

The smaller South Asian neighbors have always been wary of the enormity of India with regards to geographical size, population, military strength, market, production, and international influence. They have been worried if India would try to project a “big brother” and “holier than thou” image and pursue hegemony in the region. The supposed failure of SAARC is at times alluded to the alleged big brother mentality of India. For peace, for shared prosperity, and for making real the fundamental principle of equality and mutual benefit, India needs to take action to shed such an image. SAARC presents the perfect means to correct the perception of India’s attitude. Stereotypes lurk in inaction. Clarification sprouts through action and engagement.

SAARC offers an opportunity to experiment with conflict resolution through third-party mediation. The countries in South Asia, in particular India and Pakistan are famous for their resoluteness in resolving their bilateral issues bilaterally. That is, without any form of third-party intervention. SAARC offers a potential means for experimentation with bilateral conflict resolution through involvement of other countries. The issue in question need not be as serious as border disputes. There are plenty of other challenges which with the countries can take baby steps such as the refugee crises between India and Bangladesh or India and Sri Lanka or the water sharing disputes between India and Nepal or that between India and Bangladesh.

South Asian states have individually evolved ways of dealing with the rise of China. India has a historically strained relationship with China and is always suspicious of its actions. China is Pakistan’s best friend. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative

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<sup>15</sup> National Security Division, Pakistan. 2022. *National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026*. Government of Pakistan.

although they are increasingly becoming vary of China’s “good intentions.” Bhutan does not have any form of diplomatic relations with China. In the anticipated event where China goes rogue and unfolds the debt-trap diplomacy, SAARC offers a common platform for the countries to reach out to.

It is important to note that the member-states are conscious of the perception that BIMSTEC is a replacement for the SAARC. In fact, they have taken overt actions to deny any such perception. Article 2 of the Charter of the BIMSTEC, which was adopted as recently as March 2022, identifies as one of its principles the complementary nature of the BIMSTEC to other organizations involving the member states.

“Cooperation within the BIMSTEC will be complementary to and not be a substitute for bilateral. Sub-regional, regional, or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States<sup>16</sup>.”

When the COVID-19 crisis was at its peak, the leaders of the SAARC member states met virtually wherein they agreed to create a COVID-19 emergency fund<sup>17</sup>. Although the plan never fully materialized, it indicates that there is an inclination among the member states in the event of any threat from a common enemy. Peace and cooperation are the objective of international relations.

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<sup>16</sup> BIMSTEC. 2022. "BIMSTEC Charter." March. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1imTXMnsLg3ostI-kN8E5L6CeRyMWrGhh/view>.

<sup>17</sup> Roy, Arindam. 2020. *Saarc Covid fund: No Indian money for Pakistan; Nepal biggest beneficiary*. November 30. Accessed July 11, 2022. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/saarc-covid-fund-no-indian-money-for-pakistan-nepal-biggest-beneficiary-120113001116\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/saarc-covid-fund-no-indian-money-for-pakistan-nepal-biggest-beneficiary-120113001116_1.html).

When one stumbles upon obstacles, one does not abort the mission but rather, strives to resolve them. SAARC is very much alive. It is simply going through a phase.

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