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The Potential of Reviving South Asian Regionalism: Whether Such Regionalism Can be Revived and Realised Using Existing Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a comprehensive analysis of whether regionalism in South Asia can be revived with the current mechanisms in place, with a particular focus on the potential reignition of SAARC as an entity. The methodology employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both primary (KIIs and a structured general survey) and secondary data (articles, editorials, newspapers, etc.). The paper discusses the current reality of South Asian regionalism while highlighting impediments to regional integration, including mutual distrust among countries, bilateral disputes, cross-border infiltration of terrorist elements, and defunct trade and investment agreements. The findings suggest that there is hope for the revival of South Asian regionalism, especially by experienced veterans of Academia. However, less optimism about South Asian regionalism and SAARC was observed among relatively younger scholars/researchers. The general survey yielded an equal split in support for and against South Asian regionalism. The research also explored whether South Asian regionalism can be realised on par with the efficiency of the EU and ASEAN, while also examining alternatives such as SASEC. An assessment of the expert interviews yielded pessimism about the revival of South Asian regionalism in the near future; however, the idea was not entirely shelved and was seen as having the potential for long-term collaboration.

Keywords: South Asia, Regionalism, South Asian Regionalism, SAARC, Bangladesh.

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia is one of the most culturally, socially, and politically diverse regions in the world (Usman, 2023; Yefremov et al., 2025). The concept of regionalism in South Asia gained relevance in the 1980s, aiming to create a similar regional cohesion framework comparable to the more successful precedents of regional integration, such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Muzaffar, Jathol, & Yaseen, 2017). The rationale for creating such an entity was to establish a South Asian regional cooperation vehicle with a distinctive South Asian identity (U. Chowdhury, 2024).

However, the level of regional cohesion between South Asian countries is less than ideal. For instance, the most recent data on intra-regional trade between the South Asian countries has been estimated at a measly 7.20% of the region's total trade at $39.55 billion, an improvement since 1996, when trade between South Asian members was only $2.56 billion in 1993 and $16.32 billion in 2010 (Kibria, 2023a, 2023b). However, according to the World Bank's 2018 estimates, South Asian intraregional trade could reach $67 billion (World Bank, 2018). The underwhelming South Asian cohesion can be attributed to salient bilateral contentions, mostly between India and Pakistan over their myriad of issues; the high cost of intraregional trade; the lack of cohesive trade and tariff policies among member countries; customs issues; general mistrust; and transnational crime and terrorism. Even the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the primary driving organisation facilitating regional cooperation in South Asia, has failed to engender cohesion among its member countries. To compensate for SAARC's ineffectiveness, most experts see potential for BIMSTEC to be a sub-regional, or even interregional, organisation to boost economic development for South Asian members. However, even BIMSTEC's progress in fulfilling its goals and ambitions has been insubstantial, a shortcoming attributed to its overly ambitious nature (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025). The research discusses the current state of South Asian regionalism and the factors behind its apparent failure. Bangladesh is showcasing renewed interest in reaccelerating SAARC. The research touches upon how Bangladesh has shown renewed interest in reviving SAARC to reimagine South Asian regionalism (The Daily Star, 2024b). Building on this new momentum, the research explores whether the revival of South Asian regionalism was feasible and formulates a set of cohesive policy recommendations in favour of effective South Asian regionalism.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Sbragia (2008) discusses the evolution of regionalism, contrasting old-guard definitions that were exclusive to strict European ideas of economic engagement with more recent understandings, such as New Regionalism/neoregionalism. This interpretation became more prominent in the later part of the twentieth century. The work contrasts between European and Asian understandings of regionalism, among others. The author suggests that Asian countries pursue regionalism beyond free trade, exploring different theories and interpretations. Acknowledging the futile adoption of European definitions in the Asian context, and definitions that are exclusively economic, the author recommends that Asian countries prioritise regional integration beyond economics, considering cultural and societal cohesion as well. The study also recommends that non-complementary economies consider regional foreign direct investment rather than relying on trade. The study, while comprehensive, did not reflect the real-world struggles of regional interactions in Asia despite having cultural and societal kinship.

Muzaffar, Jathol, and Yaseen (2017) explore the successes and failures of SAARC as an entity. The researchers shed light on the successes of SAARC, including fostering unity, cultural exchange and cohesion, prioritising education through the SAARC University, poverty alleviation, and accelerating the SAARC Covid Fund, among others. The shortcomings of SAARC were highlighted as inadequate summits, impotent trade agreements, bilateral disputes, institutional lag, etc. The authors recommend reviving SAARC to ensure mutual growth and development among countries.

Chowdhury and Islam (2017) inquire whether or not acts and elements of terrorism are affecting South Asian regional cohesion, considering Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka as fertile ground for terrorism. The study explores the dynamics between India and Pakistan, being at odds over terrorist activities, which is hindering South Asian regionalism. Their work suggests that both countries are averse to working within the regional framework of SAARC, with terrorist elements identified as the primary hurdle to regional integration. Drawing on a solution model, the study introduces five steps to address transnational elements of terrorism in South Asia: prevention, protection, preparation, response, and recovery. However, the study did not properly address how terrorist elements are affecting engagement of and between other South Asian countries, such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives.

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Jacob (2024) addresses the dire reality of South Asian regionalism, given the overall reluctance shown by both India and Pakistan, which affects not only economic cooperation but also cultural exchange between the countries. The author addresses reluctance among Indians and in India to proceed with SAARC, perceiving it as detrimental to state interests. Moreover, the lack of regional cooperation has negatively impacted labour and educational migration into the country. Despite the obvious stymies, the author remains hopeful of SAARC's resurgence as an active regional platform, suggesting the organisation prioritise pertinent threats such as regional security, underperforming economic cooperation, and climate change. Additionally, cooperation with organisations such as QUAD has also been suggested.

While studying efficacy, Bhattacharjee (2023) conducts a comparative analysis between SAARC and BIMSTEC, two of the most prominent regional organisations in South Asian countries. Using KIIs and secondary literature, the study finds stronger support for BIMSTEC than for SAARC among the experts interviewed; however, the number of experts was limited. Although more support was observed for BIMSTEC due to its functionality, the study failed to reflect the interests of other South Asian countries, as it was conducted from an Indian perspective.

Research Question

The research aims to address the following question-

1. Is the revival of South Asian regionalism possible with the current mechanisms in place?

The research addresses a range of relevant secondary questions that are concomitant with the primary question.

a. What are the present conditions of South Asian regionalism/regional integration?

b. What are the factors behind the failure of robust South Asian regional integration?

c. How is Bangladesh being affected by such stymies to regional integration?

d. Could South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) act as an alternative to SAARC to promote regional cooperation?

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e. Could the ASEAN and EU models of regional integration and cohesion be replicated in the South Asian context?

Research Objectives

The research aims to address the following objectives-

a. Explore the current conditions of South Asian regionalism.

b. Exploring the factors responsible for the failure of South Asian regionalism.

c. Briefly explore how such factors are affecting Bangladesh.

d. Comprehensively analyse whether or not South Asian regionalism can be revived.

e. Explore whether subregional mechanisms such as SASEC can act as a supplement or an alternative to a stagnant SAARC.

f. Analyse whether or not regional integration in line with the European Union or ASEAN will be possible to manifest in South Asia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining primary and secondary data. The collection of primary data included Key Informant Interviews (KII) with experts in international relations and international politics, using the Judgemental Sampling Method. Additionally, a Structured General Survey has been conducted, comprising both open- and closed-ended questions targeting current students and graduates in international relations, political science, and related majors. While not exclusive to students and graduates of the aforementioned disciplines, it did prioritise respondents with those academic backgrounds. The survey amounted to 150 responses. For both the interviews and the survey, consent was acquired from participating parties for fair use of their responses.

As a preliminary approach, the respondents were asked about their academic background and their knowledge of regional organisations relevant to South Asia, such as SAARC and BIMSTEC. The results are displayed in Figures 1 and 2 below.

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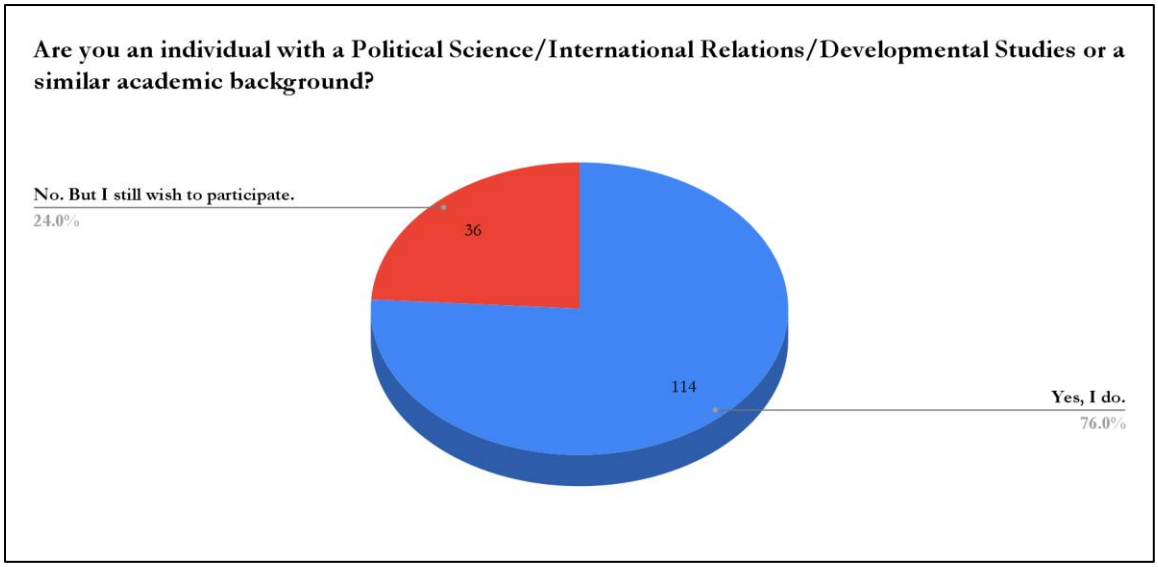


Figure 1: Survey Responses to the Question '*Are you an individual with a Political Science/International Relations/Developmental Studies or a similar academic background?'*

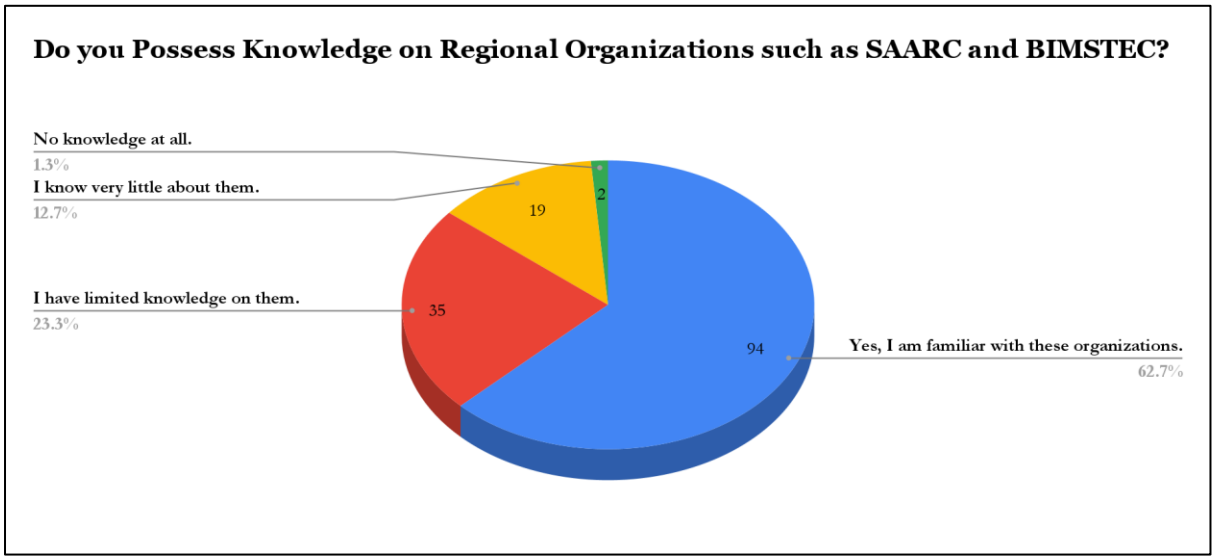


Figure 2: Survey Responses to the Question '*Do you Possess Knowledge on Regional organisations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC?'*

Secondary data, including academic publications, journal articles, opinion editorials, newspaper articles, political magazines, and other information publicly available in governmental and nongovernmental repositories, were used. The research incorporates the abductive approach under the desk Study method as part of the secondary data analysis. The Abductive approach recontextualises phenomena in pursuit of a novel understanding, while the Desk study method employs careful perusal and analysis of secondary information for research and other scholarly work.

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The Current State of South Asian Regionalism:

The concept of South Asian regionalism was born in good faith, aiming to increase economic connectivity and facilitate cultural and people-to-people exchanges. However, the dream of a more cohesive South Asia has not resulted in the desired reality it had envisioned at the time of its inception. According to Söderbaum and Shaw (2003), South Asian regionalism emerged during a period of active global dynamism, while the definition of regionalism continued to evolve. The idea of South Asian cohesion, and, as an institution, SAARC, emerged during a time when the concept of neo-regionalism was rhetorically "fulminating" around the globe in the 1980s (Asian Development Bank, 2006). Organisations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC were created during that era of rapid liberalisation. That era of regionalism, which began in the 1980s with a wave of liberalisation, has since stagnated. The following includes an updated account of the current state of regionalism within South Asia.

South Asian Regional Cooperation: The Present Conditions

This section discusses the current state of cohesion and the levels of interaction among South Asian countries, while also accounting for dynamics with extra-regional partners.

South Asia is one of the most diverse yet cohesive regions, with potential for comprehensive cooperation to ensure mutual growth and development. According to Sanjay Kathuria (2018), South Asia has the potential to generate intraregional trade valued at $67 billion. However, the region’s intraregional trade was in reality merely $23 billion, underwhelming compared to its potential. However, Kibria (2023a) suggests intraregional trade had improved to $39.55 billion in 2022, which is 7.20% of the region’s total trade (Kibria, 2023b). This number, while an improvement, was far from reaching the actual intraregional trade potential for South Asia.

Jacob (2024) explains how Indians perceive South Asian regionalism as deleterious to their national and global ambitions. Given India's geographical contiguity with 6 of its 7 South Asian neighbours, India’s preference for bilateral economic relations with the other South Asian countries has been observed, rather than regional engagements through SAARC or BIMSTEC. Shishir and Sakib (2023) validate Jacob’s analysis, explaining India’s high emphasis on its national interests when engaging in regional organisations. New Delhi's approach to South Asian regional fora has very little to do with the revitalisation of regionalism.

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Cooperation is Intact, But Cohesion is Absent

Fruman (2024) and Jacob's (2024) findings mention the pursuit of elaborate connectivity projects within South Asia. Prime examples of such endeavours are Bangladesh allowing India to use the Chattogram and Mongla Ports as transit hubs, as well as the two countries inaugurating the Akhaura-Agartala rail route. Another success was the inauguration of the supply of 40 MW of electricity to Bangladesh from Nepal via the Indian Grid, which was estimated to be a boon for Bangladesh's manufacturing and industrial sectors (Prasain, 2024). Under this agreement, Nepal will provide Bangladesh with electricity annually from June 15 to November 15 for 5 years.

Fruman's (2024) findings further suggest that India does not envision regional integration that includes Pakistan. There is interest in regional connectivity, both on land and at sea, and a strong emphasis on energy trade, especially India's purchase of Nepalese electricity and its role as a transit for Bangladesh to import the same Nepalese hydroelectricity (Prasain, 2024). However, these plans bar Islamad's participation in the Indian political psyche.

Pakistan, on the other hand, perceives India as having hegemonic ambitions in South Asia. Kibria (2023a) attributes these alleged Indian ambitions primarily to its gargantuan landmass, which is unparalleled among the region's other members. However, according to the former's findings, South Asia has been on a 'China-leaning' strategy to counterbalance India's preponderance (Jacob, 2024). And China has been eagerly expanding its presence in the region by strengthening trade and investment relations with countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

The United States is also considering becoming an active investor in South Asia. Usman (2023) mentions the presence of the United States to counterbalance Chinese influence, while anticipating a collaboration with India.

High Trade Costs, Terrorist Aspects, And Division Within the Region Are Further Affecting Regional Integration:

The high cost of trade is hampering regional growth in South Asia. Intra-regional trade in South Asia is among the most expensive regional trade costs worldwide (Kathura & Mathur, 2018).

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Moreover, elements of terrorism are adversely affecting India-Pakistan relations, hindering South Asian regional integration. Their bilateral issues dominantly concern Pakistan's homegrown terrorist elements (Firstpost, 2025). The most recent manifestation of terrorist activities in South Asia: the Pahalgam attack in India's Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistani militant group, The Resistance Front (TRF), created an atmosphere of fear and caused the deaths of 26 people, regressing India-Pakistan ties by decades. As retaliation, India suspended bilateral trade with Pakistan, closed off their land border, and suspended the Indus Water Treaty, the principal water-sharing treaty between the two countries (Ahmed, 2025).

According to Dr Mohammad Atique Rahman, Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Dhaka University, Bangladesh, the bilateral concerns between India and Pakistan have spilt over into other countries in the region, eventually creating regional divisions (M. A. Rahman, personal communication, 19 February 2025). According to Syed Raiyan Amir, Research Associate at the Centre for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA), the India-Pakistan question, referring to their unrelenting contention, is solely responsible for the stagnation of South Asian regional cohesion (Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

China's Gradual Encroachment into South Asia

Amid the aforementioned stagnation in South Asian regional integration, the region has attracted significant attention from a particular global power: China. The country has been significantly improving its interaction with South Asia, through investments, counterinvestments, and political influence (Usman, 2023).

- With Afghanistan, China was the first country to continue direct diplomatic engagements, without officially recognising the country. Additionally, Afghanistan's products enjoy 100% duty-free access to China, and bilateral trade in 2023 reached USD 1.3 billion (Ali, 2024). According to Shah (2024), China has shown strong interest in investing in Afghanistan's lithium and other rare-earth mineral deposits, estimated to be worth nearly $1 trillion.

- China is Bangladesh's most prominent trade and investment partner, with China investing 24.4 billion USD through Bangladesh's accession into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (FAIR, 2023). It is also Bangladesh's dominant defence partner, accounting for 71.9% of Bangladesh's military procurements between 2008 and 2017

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(Hussain & Islam, 2021). Economically, China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, with Bangladesh importing $18.6 billion from China in 2023, exporting $676 million worth of goods to the East Asian giant. Moreover, China has granted 100% duty-free access to all Bangladeshi products (The Daily Star, 2024a).

- Bhutan and China share a 477-kilometre-long border, which is plagued by the Chinese desire to absorb some of Bhutan's land territory, especially Doklam, which China has historical claims over (Mehta, 2024). The two countries came close to reaching a border agreement in 2001, following its initiation in 1996, but the process was halted due to India's security concerns. Recent discussions began in 2021, with a three-step roadmap for boundary negotiations being reached and the cooperation agreement signed, which stipulates the guidelines for a joint technical team to work on border delimitation (Mehta, 2024).

- India and China may have the most tumultuous relationship among all the other South Asian countries. After Narendra Modi's ascent to power in 2014, both border security infrastructure and military concentration along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (the India-China border) have increased. As of February 2025, the two countries have reached an understanding to reset border exchanges to the pre-Galwan Valley clash conditions; however, the process has not been articulated (Shah, 2025). Despite bilateral skirmishes, China remains India's largest trade partner, with India importing $100 billion in Chinese goods in 2024 (Shah, 2025).

- The Maldives is seemingly edging closer towards China under President Mohamed Muizzu, which holds 20% of Male's sovereign loans, something ushering in a shift from the Maldives' previous policy of economic, security, and political proximity to India (Basarker, 2024). China is the country's most prominent investor, especially in the infrastructure sector. However, bilateral trade is in China's favour: its exports to the Maldives are $467 million, against the Maldives' $62,000 in exports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

- China's ambition in Nepal focuses on two factors: removing Indian presence in the country and countering US economic and political influence (Kumar, 2024). China is attempting, quite vehemently, to outperform the US's investment of USD 500 million in Nepal's road and energy infrastructure projects under the U.S. Millennium Challenge

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Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact, using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for similar projects, as well as manufacturing-sector investments. China has been Nepal's biggest FDI partner, accounting for 86.66% of Nepal's FDI commitments (Pradhan, 2024).

- Pakistan may be China's closest South Asian ally. The duo are collaborators for the grandiose China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with an estimated budget of over USD 62 billion, the largest single-country funding under the BRI (Zhang & Malik, 2024) and plans to connect China's Western regions with the Middle East via Pakistan's land route and the Gwadar port. However, such ambitions are yet to become corporeal (Sharma, 2024; Zhang & Malik, 2024).

- In Sri Lanka, China has financed large-scale infrastructure projects. However, in the post-default era, with the ascent to power of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, there is a strategic shift towards attracting Chinese investment rather than accumulating more debt. China has been Sri Lanka's most prominent lender and investor in the last 15 years, funding projects such as the Colombo Port City (Moramudali & Chen, 2025).

The discussion suggests China's gradual encroachment into South Asia, with China assuming the role of a gargantuan trade and investment partner for almost all of the region's members, even with India, despite their frigid diplomatic relationship and persistent border tensions. This is indicative of China's broader approach to gaining significant influence over South Asia.

OBSERVATION

The overall discussion on the current conditions of South Asian regional engagements paints a very disappointing picture. The landscape has its roots in the realists' pragmatism, to the extent that it may be failing to reach its optimal potential and generate collective gains. Despite having immense potential for mutual growth, the countries are unable, rather reluctant, to meet each other halfway on regional platforms, with factors such as bilateral contentions, regional divisions, and terrorism playing significantly dominant roles. And this void of regional integration has led the countries to veer towards external lenders, investors, and trading partners such as China. Overall, the current state of regional integration and regionalism in general in South Asia is quite disappointing.

The Factors Behind the Failure of South Asian Regionalism

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According to Dr Mohammad Atique Rahman, the success of regionalism in any capacity depends on a set of independent variables such as the member countries' desire for regional integration, mutual understanding between countries, openness to increasing members, regional colonial legacy, and the ability of countries to trade in what they specialise in, among others. If these independent variables are given positive allowances, the regionalism variable is achieved quite successfully (M. A. Rahman, personal communication, 19 February 2025). However, most of the criteria for the independent variables are not met in South Asia.

Recent data in the public domain suggest that intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts for only 5% of the region's overall trade (Shishir & Sakib, 2023, p. 625). Even intraregional investments in South Asia are 0.6% and 2.7% of the total global inward and outward foreign direct investment amount (Yatawara, Kathuria, & Zhu, 2021, p. 30). These depressing numbers indicate poor regional integration in South Asia.

Several key factors have significantly hindered the growth of South Asian regionalism. The following discussion examines in detail the factors responsible for the failure of South Asian regional integration.

The India-Pakistan Bilateral Dilemma

India and Pakistan's bilateral issues regarding Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan's inability to thwart plans and acts of terrorism within its borders (Money Control, 2024), their nuclear status, and general mistrust have not only affected their bilateral relationship but have also severely affected the potential for South Asia to coalesce under a singular regional banner. According to Mohammad Aynul Islam, Professor, Department of Political Science, Dhaka University, one of the core reasons for the failure of South Asian regionalism is the India-Pakistan bilateral contentions and misunderstandings. The academician adds that this bilateral mistrust and subsequent acts of hostility have severely affected regional cohesion in South Asia. Moreover, this bilateral, contentious relationship has created divisions among other South Asian countries (M. A. Islam, personal communication, 16 February, 2025).

Farhan Sarwar attributed the bilateral contentions between Islamabad and New Delhi to the failure of South Asian regionalism. As long as the bilateral relationship between these two nuclear powers does not improve or reach a relatively neutral position, South Asian regionalism shall remain in its current inert state for the foreseeable future (Sarwar, personal communication, 12 February 2025). Syed Raiyan Amir also notes that the India-Pakistan

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dispute is the most prominent challenge affecting South Asian regionalism (S. R. Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

The Aspect of Terrorism Stymying the Momentum of South Asian Regionalism

The unabated growth of terrorist activities in South Asia can be attributed to the India-Pakistan bilateral contentions. This growth can be attributed to countries' national failures to contain these terrorist elements. This element has not only restricted the ways in which these two countries can collaborate under SAARC's banner, but also adversely affected their bilateral engagements. To add insult to injury, Indian Army Chief Upendra Dwivedi has dubbed Pakistan as the "epicentre of terrorism" while addressing the void of cross-border interaction (Firstpost, 2025). This censure had instigated a retaliatory response from Pakistan's top military brass. Then, quite predictably, that response was castigated by the Indian media for emanating from the Pakistan military rather than the foreign ministry. Thus, contributing to the continuation of a vicious cycle of contentions.

Upon interviewing Mr Alimul Razib, a geopolitical analyst and freelance writer, Mr Razib described memories from more than a decade ago when the concept of the "One SAARC One Visa" policy was being pushed. However, he distinctly remembers how the initiative was brought to a halt, rather than rejected, due to apprehensions about a spillover of terrorist elements (Razib, personal communication, January 22, 2025). This bilateral contention over Pakistan's supposed failure to contain terrorism within its borders has made India feel wary of a more integrated South Asia. According to a 2024 statement by Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, the reason SAARC talks have reached an impasse is solely due to Islamabad's nonchalance and failure to curb terrorism on its soil (Money Control, 2024). During the survey for this research, one participant, for anonymity, explained that the religious divide among South Asian countries, particularly India and Pakistan, has exacerbated the widening gap in South Asian integration.

High Cost of South Asian Regional Trade

According to scholarly works and publicly available statistics, South Asian trade is among the most expensive in the world. According to Kathuria and Mathur (2018), whose work focused on the reality of intra-regional connectivity and cost of intra-regional trade, South Asia trade has been mired by complex customs procedures, inadequate border infrastructure, compliance costs associated with tariff and non-tariff measures, and other costs associated with poor

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connectivity (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018). According to the same study, trade in pairs in South Asia is 20% more expensive than trade in pairs in ASEAN in Southeast Asia. Other findings suggest that South Asian regional trade is only 6% of their overall trade. This pales in comparison to East Asia (35%) and the European Union (60%) (Rozario & Rahman, 2023).

A study by Kathuria and Arenas (2018, p. 89) suggests that complex paratax impositions in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are adding to the high trade costs in South Asia. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are South Asian members with high para-tariffs in place. Additionally, Sri Lanka tops the list of South Asian countries with the highest ad valorem rate on its imports (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018, p. 11).

Another reason for increased trade expenses is the physical distance between the members and the lack of implementation of transit and transportation agreements. Yatawara, Kathuria, and Zhu (2021) find an inverse relationship between the cost of intra-regional trade and its volume. Their study suggests that as trade costs increase, the volume of intra-regional trade decreases (Yatawara, Kathuria, & Zhu, 2021; 50). This increase in expenses is due to using land transportation for South Asian intra-regional trade, which is affected by delays at customs checks, a lack of quality storage facilities, and a lack of quality testing facilities near the borders.

Defunct Free Trade Agreements

Free trade agreements do increase welfare, both nationally and regionally, and are considered "welfare-enhancing" (Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 22). However, on a negative note, Mattli (1999) criticises the grandiose nature of signing free trade documents, which yield little to no outcome.

SAARC had introduced two trade agreement frameworks, the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), which came into effect in 1995, and the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), which came into effect in 2006. Both attempts were made with the hope of increasing regional trade by significantly lowering barriers.

It is to be noted that traders in South Asia prefer to trade using the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) mechanism rather than FTAs, because of two primary reasons: a) Data on FTAs is very sparse, and 2) The price of complying with the Rules of Origin (ROO)e fares better than the financial incentives resulting from FTA pursuits (ADB, 2013, p. 25). These insufficiencies

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have resulted in very meagre utilisation of FTAs in South Asia, despite a significant portion of businesses in the region being zealous of pursuing trade under FTAs. According to Tarek Hassan Semul, the countries in South Asia possess non-complementary similar industries, mostly manufacturing and export-oriented, which compete for optimal penetration into larger markets rather than pursuing intra-regional trade more rigorously (Semul, personal communication, January 26, 2025). This statement is supported by the findings of Ur-Rashid and Khan (2024), which indicate that 90% of South Asian trade is bound for destinations outside the region. Moreover, Kathuria and Mathur (2018, p 99) suggest that the SAFTA Charter does not include reducing the list of sensitive products, which is primarily responsible for the high cost of intraregional trade.

South Asia's regional tariffs are higher than most other regions. For instance, the sensitive list carried by countries under SAFTA covers 35% of regionally traded goods, significantly stymies regional cohesion, and undermining SAFTA's inherent free-trade aspirations. And according to Kibria (2023a, 2023b), South Asian Trade in Services (SATIS), the addendum agreement that includes trade in services to be included under free trade facilities has also been inert since 2016.

Failure in Becoming a Regional Supply Chain

Most South Asian countries are considered as ‘developing’ under the United Nations definition. 4 of the 8 South Asian countries, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal have the "least developed countries" status, with India and Pakistan, the largest two countries, only emerging out of the "low income” country status in the 2000s decade (Yatawara, Kathuria, & Zhu, 2021; p 28). The findings by Yatawara, Kathuria, and Zhu (2021) suggest that low-income countries have great difficulty establishing robust, high-tech supply chains, thereby failing to attract inward FDI from the developed world. ASM Tarek Hassan Semul stressed the importance of establishing robust supply chains in South Asia to boost inward FDI, especially in Bangladesh (Semul, personal communication, January 26, 2025).

Asymmetrical View of Regionalism by Countries

South Asian countries are notorious for their inability to see eye to eye. Kibria (2023a) states that, as an entity, SAARC had not been as functional as it could have been because the political elites of the member states were unable to prioritise regional integration. Syed Raiyan Amir made a statement along the same lines, suggesting that the prioritisation of SAARC and

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regional cooperation in South Asia happens in phases, in line with the political elites of the member countries. The expert specifically points out the scenario of India, the most prominent South Asian country, affecting the other members' regional cooperation choices. Mr Amir explains that when the Bangladesh government prioritises SAARC, India becomes less amenable to Dhaka's leadership. However, if Bangladesh prioritises BIMSTEC over SAARC, then India's approach to that government becomes significantly more muted (Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025). This scenario of India as the dominant country in South Asia and how it will affect the choices of the other members of the region has been validated by the study by Shishir and Sakib (2023), which affirms India's choices and concerns and their impact on the choices of other countries in South Asia.

Significant Lack of Trust between South Asian Countries

According to Kaushik Basu, Professor of Economics, and C. Marks, Professor of Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, and former Chief Economist of the World Bank (2012–16), trust promotes trade and trade fosters trust (Kathuria, 2018, p. 16). Dr Nurul Huda Sakib, Professor, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, ascribes the growing mistrust between South Asian members to the India-Pakistan rivalry. According to Dr Sakib, the India-Pakistan conflict has created divisions among the smaller countries of South Asia, exacerbating distrust between the countries (N. H. Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

In South Asia, the level of trust between member countries is less than desirable. Yatawara, Kathuria, and Zhu (2021) surveyed entrepreneurs in South Asia to determine whether they trust people from other South Asian countries. The respondents had to choose on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 representing the least trust and 4 the highest level of trust. The resultant number was 2.58, indicating "not much, or some trust".

Kathuria (2018) indicates that the deficit in trust among South Asian member countries is crucially affecting regional trade and investment. The author recommends that South Asian countries reduce trade deficits by citing the India-Bangladesh border as a paragon of good faith and a success story of mutual trust.

Absence of Complementary Economies Affecting Regional Economic Cohesion

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One of the biggest hurdles to South Asian economic regionalism is the similar nature of these economies. When asked, Professor Dr Delwar Hossain, Professor, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, Bangladesh, affirmed that the similarities in the economies of South Asia have rendered intra-regional trade an unimpressive one (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025). According to Amirul Kadir Alif, since Asia, as a collective, is a region dominated by RMG exports, South Asian countries generally compete with each other in the global market. He adds that most other countries, especially India and Pakistan, have very decent indigenous cotton sources, a factor that is detrimental to countries such as Bangladesh, which imports most of its raw materials for the RMG sector. The South Asian reality of non-complementary economies has become one of its most damning qualities in the context of regional integration (Alif, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

Political Vias Affecting Intra-Regional Trade

Political bias and a lack of political will to proceed affect South Asian regionalism. Hashim and Razzaq (2016) conducted an international trade survey in which they empirically compared the trade distances of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to their top 10 trade partners, as well as trade between the three countries. Their findings suggest that the median trade distance between India and Pakistan, and between India and its global trading partners, is 14,000 km and 10,000 km, respectively. However, their trade distance is 30,000 km, whereas their physical distance is only 1,238 km (Hashim & Razzaq, 2016, p. 19). The same was the case between India and Bangladesh. Despite India's trade distance with Bangladesh being 9000 km, much lower than its trade distances with other global partners, the number is much higher than the actual distance between the countries, which is a mere 1500 km (Hashim & Razzaq, 2016, p. 19, 22).

How are Such Failures Affecting Bangladesh?

The Bangladesh Data from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2023) points out Bangladesh's inherent need to export both goods (89%) and services (11%) (including labour) to sustain economic growth and promote development.

Syed Raiyan Amir points out the sudden halt to the Bhutan-India-Bangladesh and Nepal-India-Bangladesh energy transfer projects, as well as Adani Power's sudden shift in tone towards Bangladesh over delayed payments. Additionally, diesel supply via the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline has also been stalled due to, as India puts it, “political instability in Bangladesh” (S. R. Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025). Mr Amir adds that the

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former interim Chief Adviser in Bangladesh, Dr Muhammad Yunus's more amiable approach to Pakistan drove a wedge between New Delhi and Dhaka. Yunus was also a staunch proponent of SAARC, an organisation India is not too keen to reaccelerate.

Amirul Kadir Alif attributes the homogeneous and non-complementary nature of South Asian economies to their export-driven nature, which is critically affecting South Asian economic integration, including Bangladesh. He repeatedly emphasises the need to increase indigenous and foreign investment in Bangladesh's export-oriented sectors (Alif, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

On a rather positive note, the findings by Datt et al. (2018) highlight the positive outcomes of the border haat trade between Bangladesh and India, including secondary income for vendors and jobs for labourers and manufacturers (Datt et al., 2018; p. 194). Moreover, these haats are providing a lifeline to marginalised areas. However, the findings also suggest that Indian vendors and transporters benefit more from the haats than their Bangladesh counterparts do. However, Indian vendors tend to invest more in haats and have higher agricultural yields and more active transporters than Bangladesh (Datt et al., 2018). However, these haats spur people-to-people exchanges, provide basic and supplementary income to poor households, and improve women's participation, according to their overall findings.

This list of aspects discussed, although not exhaustive, is a fair indication of why regionalism in South Asia has been stagnating over the years.

The Probability/Potential of the Revival of South Asian Regionalism

We begin this discussion by sharing the general survey results. The 150 respondents were asked whether regionalism achieved through regional organisations in South Asia is an obsolete concept.

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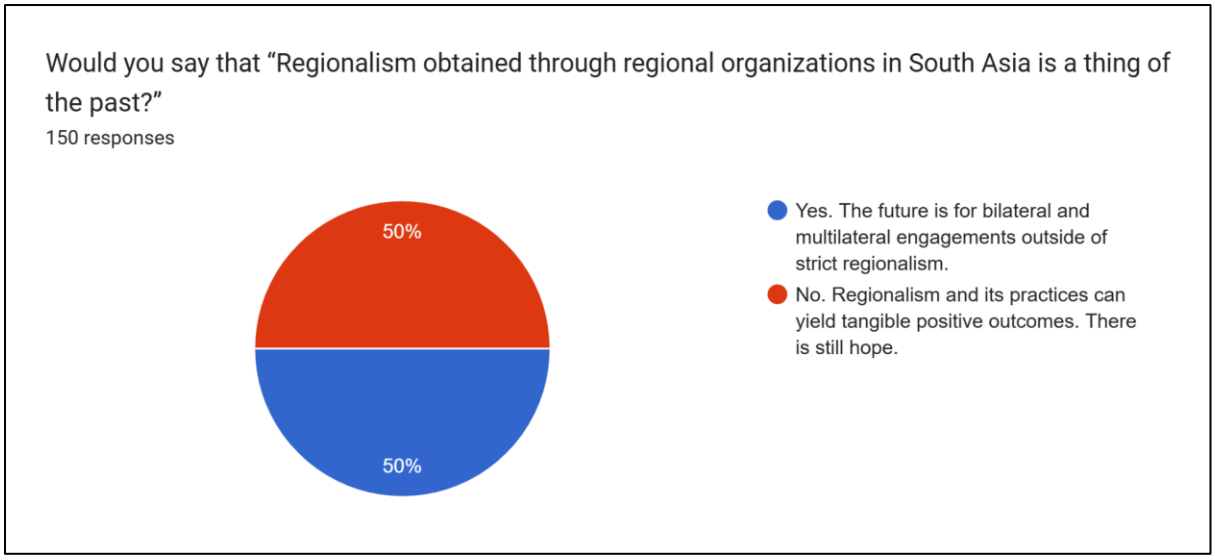
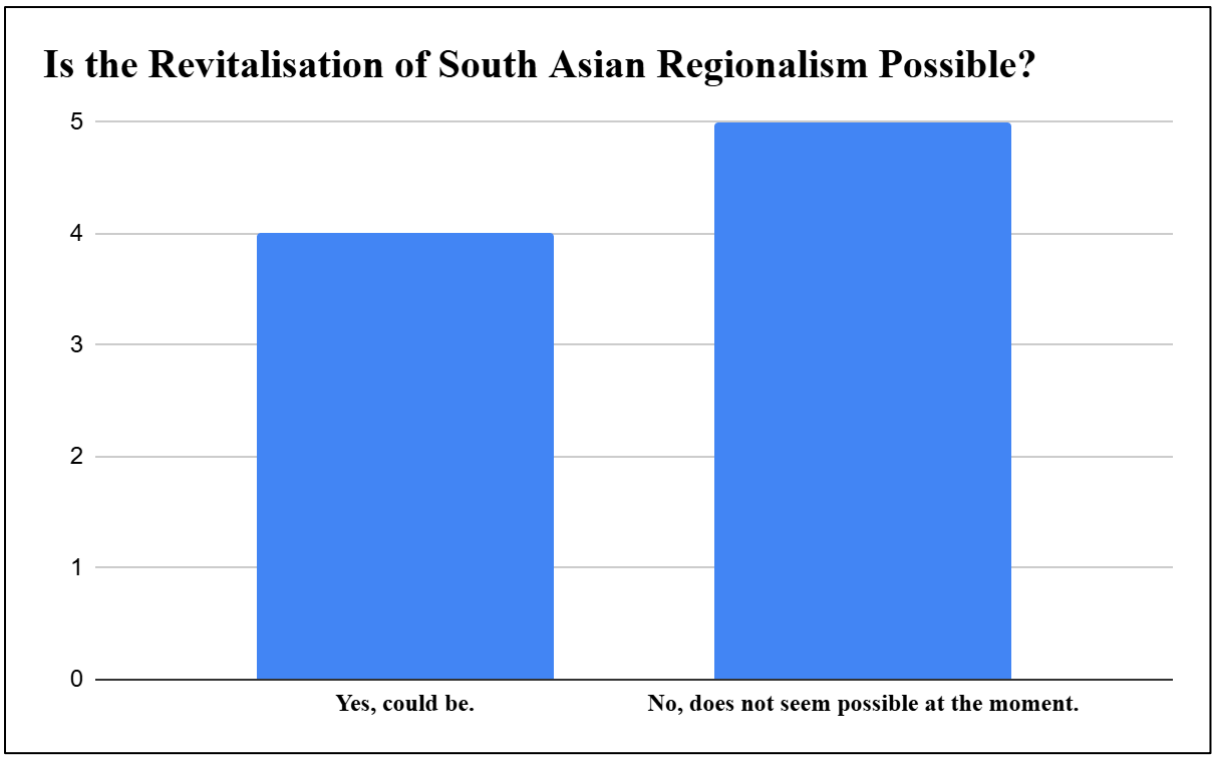


Figure 1: Responses

As mentioned in Figure 1, within the 150, 75 (50%) agreed that the future of South Asian regionalism lies in bilateral, multilateral, and plurilateral engagements. While the other 50% still had faith in regional organisations to produce tangible yields.

While interviewing key experts in international relations, political science, and geopolitics, the interviewees were asked individually whether South Asian regionalism could be revived. Figure 2 shows their responses.



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Figure 2: Interviews with International Experts

This bar graph represents the opinions of nine experts on the pragmatic possibility of reviving South Asian regionalism. The graph was generated based on the substance of their statements and translated into a concise binary statement. Five of the experts are pessimistic about the revival, while four of them remain hopeful. The opinions are expressed in detail below.

Professor Dr Delwar Hossain remains optimistic and explains that while making statements such as "regionalism for South Asia is a thing of the past", people do not consider the inner intricacies of regional institutions such as SAARC. Most people (i.e., the general public) are not aware of the inner workings of these organisations. "SAARC is still holding meetings and functioning, albeit not summits" (D. Hossain, personal communication, January 29, 2025).

Professor Hossain was asked whether or not he believes that South Asian regionalism could be recalibrated through a different organisation. He rationalised against the creation of any new regional organisation or framework, stating that new organisations would be unfruitful and prognosticating that their fate would be the same as a stagnant SAARC once the novelty wears off (Hossain, personal communication, January 29, 2025). This interview was conducted months before there were whispers of a China-led attempt to create a replacement for SAARC and invite other South Asian countries to join, holding a trilateral meeting in Kunming, China, on June 19, 2025, after recent reinforcements to Bangladesh-Pak relationships under the stewardship of Muhammad Yunus as Bangladesh's interim Chief Advisor (The Business Standard, 2025). India has shown concerns regarding such a nexus (India Today, 2025). The statement remains antithetical to the emboldened determination for a new South Asian regional organisation.

When asked the same question as Prof Hossain, ASM Tarek Hassan Semul focused on the needs of the common people, especially ethnic minorities. According to the scholar, if countries can successfully address the needs of their people, especially those residing in rural areas, then the frequency of intra-state conflicts will likely decrease, significantly reducing national instability and leading to better cross-border trade and investment. This, in conjunction with the facilitation of people-to-people exchanges and inter-governmental dialogue, will indeed make the revival/rejuvenation of South Asian regionalism possible (Semul, personal communication, January 26, 2025).

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Mohammad Aynul Islam, when asked whether he sees hope for South Asian regionalism, replied sanguinely about its revival, emphasising its significance (Islam, personal communication, 16 February, 2025).

Dr Nurul Huda Sakib is also positive about the potential for revival. He highlights SAARC's undeniable importance to South Asia and recommends that the India-Pakistan disputes be addressed and resolved (Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

On a different note, Professor Abul Kalam Azad, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Security & Strategic Studies (FSSS), Bangladesh University of Professionals, answered less than optimistically. The professor could not foresee a foreseeable future where South Asian regionalism was a possibility, citing the belaboured India-Pakistan rivalry as the major stymie (Azad, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

Along the same "less than hopeful" line of thinking, Alimul Razib opines that regionalism as an idea is seemingly obsolete in South Asia. Given Bangladesh's successful bilateral and multilateral global relationships, it should primarily focus on its functional relations. Mr Razib adds that, given Bangladesh's advancements in international relations and technology, the country should prioritise research into technological advancements, as well as technology transfers, to reduce future international reliance (Razib, personal communication, 2 February 2025).

Syed Raiyan Amir opined that SAARC is perpetually stuck in limbo because of the India-Pakistan tensions arising from a plethora of bilateral issues. However, Mr Amir recommends that South Asia pursue an economic framework that strictly and formally caters to economic cooperation, with no other issues to be discussed under that banner. This may invigorate South Asian regionalism. However, he does not perceive South Asian regionalism as how it is reviving anytime soon (Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

Farhan Sarwar rationalises that the majority of South Asian trade is conducted with countries outside of the region. He does not see any rationale for focusing on reviving something that has not lived up to expectations since its inception. Mr Sarwar emphasises and recommends South Asian extra-regional trade and the attraction of foreign direct investment from both within and outside the region (Sarwar, personal communication, 12 February 2025). This statement is synonymous with the research on comparative regionalism by Alberta Sbragia (2008).

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Mr Azim, along the same trajectory of thought as Mr Sarwar, advocates pursuing extra-regional trade and investment engagements by South Asian countries. 'Pursue and sustain what is already reaping tangible benefits for the countries of South Asia, which is the engagement with countries outside the region,' opined Mr Azim (A. Azim, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC): A Minimised yet Effective Approach to Regionalism:

The South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) has its roots in the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), established in 1996 between four SAARC member countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. The essential goal of SASEC was to accelerate sustainable economic development among the four countries. SASEC has been primarily assisted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) since 1997 (Asian Development Bank, 2008, p. 16). The current members of SASEC are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Nepal (SASEC, n.d.).

Precedents of SASEC reaping tangible results have been observed by the ADB, with the boosting of energy, connectivity, and tourism projects between the countries. To improve trade, investment, and private-sector involvement and cooperation, the South Asia Business Forum was established under SASEC to serve as the apex of the chambers of commerce and industry of the SASEC countries (Asian Development Bank, 2008, p. 16).

According to the ADB's findings, sub-regional cooperation mechanisms such as SASEC can more easily reach consensus on decision-making and the implementation of policies and projects because of the small number of members involved. The report finds SASEC to be more efficient than larger regional cooperation organisations such as SAARC and to be an integral part of promoting project-based cooperation between member countries (Asian Development Bank, 2008, p. 3).

When Syed Raiyan Amir was asked whether SASEC frameworks were a good substitute for SAARC's ineffectiveness, the scholar explained that India wields tremendous influence even under SASEC frameworks, where the country may attempt to create SASEC alliances with Pakistan excluded. Given India's incontrovertible dominance in South Asia, SASEC frameworks would also serve India's ambitions.

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When Professor Dr Delwar Hossain was asked the same question, he dubbed the SASEC framework a manifestation of neo-regionalism. He explains that SASEC is already building on South Asia's energy and infrastructure development projects, with donor support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). He advised against any hegemonic practices under SASEC. However, the framework itself is complicated due to factors such as over-reliance on external donors to fund projects (Hossain, personal communication, January 29, 2025).

Building on Professor Hossain's statement, ASM Tarek Hassan Semul suggests focusing on energy and infrastructure development projects under SASEC to foster regional growth, which will, in turn, lead to stronger regional cooperation (Semul, personal communication, January 26, 2025).

Is Regional Cohesion on par with the EU and ASEAN possible for South Asia?

When referring to the regional cohesion conduit, SAARC, we must remind ourselves that although the principles of cooperation, communication, and cohesion are etched into every regional entity's constitutional charter, their implementation and adherence do not measure the same across members.

According to Syed Raiyan Amir, the foundation for European cohesion was the collective desire to rise from the ruins and destruction of World War II, citing two factors: i) The need to rebuild Europe from the ground up, and ii) Thwarting the agendas of the common enemy: the then Soviet Union, an enemy introduced to the European consciousness by the United States. (Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025). This analysis can also be attributed to the ASEAN model, which emerged from the apprehension of the spread of communism in the region and the aim of upholding a collective neutral stance against the US and the USSR spheres of influence.

Dr Mohammad Atique Rahman considers the creation of the EU to be one of the most successful manifestations of regionalism. However, the successful and coherent EU of today took more than 35 years for the member countries to agree on issues such as the common rule of law and regulations, border policies, the creation of the Schengen area, and a common currency, among other regional necessities. Such aspirations are absent in South Asia (Rahman, personal communication, 19 February 2025).

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Dr Rahman emphasises that regionalism in South Asia should extend beyond South Asia's physical geography into Southeast Asia, enabling countries such as Bangladesh to explore new markets and improve connectivity with the region, particularly in economic engagements (Rahman, personal communication, 19 February 2025).

ASM Tarek Hassan Semul refers to the historical grievances and contemporary political divisions based on ethnicity and religion witnessed in South Asia. According to Mr Semul, this level of disparity and division on religious grounds is not as apparent, or at all, in either the EU or SAARC (Semul, personal communication, January 26, 2025). This division is a significant hurdle to the said nature of cohesion, something that must be overcome.

Professor Dr Delwar Hossain provided a more straightforward answer when asked the same question. He believes that although regional cohesion on par with the EU or ASEAN might not be “pragmatically” possible at the time being, it could be possible for cohesion as similar, if not exact, to manifest in the South Asian context in the next 10-15 or 15-20 years (Hossain, personal communication, January 29, 2025).

Dr Nurul Huda Sakib attributes the success of the EU and ASEAN, often referred to as paragons of regional cohesion, to stronger social cohesion, minimal economic disparities among members, and minimal corruption. However, according to Dr Sakib, the same supportive attributes are absent in South Asia, where there is ample evidence of economic disparity among members, a pervasive culture of corruption, and the presence of identity politics. His observations dictate the presence of identity politics based on religion, indicative of the Hindu vs Muslim dynamic, as being the biggest hurdle to South Asian regionalism. Unless these factors are addressed, South Asian regionalism cannot be revived anytime soon (Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

Alimul Razib ruled out the possibility of the EU and ASEAN models being replicated in South Asia, citing the lack of cohesion among members, their unwillingness to strengthen SAARC, and, most importantly, the India-Pakistan bilateral tensions as notable reasons. Unless both New Delhi and Islamabad learn to see eye to eye and begin to prioritise regionalism over petty bilateral concerns, Mr Razib does not see SAARC progressing to the slightest. (Razib, personal communication, 2 February 2025).

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Farhan Sarwar also did not perceive South Asian regionalism as something that could be revived in the foreseeable future. Instead, he urges Bangladesh to pursue its bilateral relations rather than regionalist fervour (F. Sarwar, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

According to Anowarul Azim, regionalistic endeavours by South Asian countries, be it through SAARC or BIMSTEC, might be futile, given that these institutions are highly ambitious yet have been very impotent in delivering on their promises (A. Azim, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

Despite everything, the government of Bangladesh has shown great optimism about both SAARC and BIMSTEC, believing they can deliver substance and results to the regional ambitions of South Asian countries. Speaking at a roundtable workshop titled 'ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward' held at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Ambassador Md. Jashim Uddin, Foreign Secretary of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, explained that Bangladesh was very optimistic about reviving SAARC and collaborating more robustly with BIMSTEC. He further added that Bangladesh has already been engaging with India at the ministerial level to facilitate SAARC talks (Uddin, 2025, "ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward," Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka).

To sum up, the general survey of 150 participants found equal outcomes: 50% of respondents thought regionalism is an obsolete concept for South Asia, while the other 50% were optimistic about its revival, indicating a mixed perception.

Upon exploring the perspectives of experts in the field of geopolitics and regionalism, a diverse array of opinions emerged; however, most were negative about reviving South Asian regionalism. It was observed that more seasoned, experienced experts were more optimistic about the rejuvenation of South Asian regionalism, whereas younger, newer experts in the field were less optimistic about the process. Instead, the individuals recommended sustaining and improving the functional bilateral and plurilateral relationships that South Asian countries already have. In their opinion, this will improve the growth and development of these countries, especially Bangladesh. Additional recommendations include that South Asian regionalism expand deeper into Southeast Asia. This, according to them, will allow countries from both regions to explore each other's markets and improve trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges.

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CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to comprehensively explore whether South Asian regionalism could be revived in the foreseeable future through current regional cooperation mechanisms. The study proceeds by examining the current conditions of South Asian regionalism across different dimensions. The study then analyses the core factors responsible for the failure of South Asian regionalism, including bilateral disputes, a lack of trust, inefficient infrastructure, and ineffective free trade agreements. Drawing on both survey and expert knowledge from interviews, the research explores the revival of South Asian regionalism. Both the survey and the expert interview suggest that reviving South Asian regional integration might be a mammoth task at present, with no prospect of efficiency in the foreseeable future. But the overall verdict has not been deemed pessimistic, rather one with hope for the revival of South Asian regionalism. The findings from the interviews suggest that the revival of South Asian regionalism might take time. It then explores alternatives to SAARC, such as SASEC. The experts further explain that unanimity among members is a prerequisite to reaccelerating SAARC. The study also explores whether cohesion on par with the EU's and ASEAN's standards was possible, with experts suggesting it is unlikely in the near future. Irrespective of said regionalism's revival, the countries have been advised to prioritise their extra-regional trade and investment relations. The study briefly addressed how Bangladesh might have been affected by the stalled South Asian regional cohesion.

To conclude, this study suggests that South Asian regionalism is indeed possible; however, significant time is needed before tangible results are achieved. The prerequisite to regionalism's revival in South Asia would be the consensus of the member countries to work collectively. If and when the aforementioned conditions for South Asian regionalism are met, especially consensus among members, only then will tangible results be achieved, observed, and experienced.

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