

Minilateralism in South Asia: SAARC Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract: The concept of minilateralism which involves small group of countries is emerging as a viable option to overcome the difficulties of traditional multilateralism, especially in South Asia where rivalrous great powers have thwarted regionalism in SAARC. India is one of the countries which have relied greatly on bilateralism and minilateralism to tackle its security problems in recent times. It has engaged in various minilateral summits and meetings alongside Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. However, India's foreign policy is driven mainly towards countering China's growing influence and Pakistan's hegemony in the region. Pakistan on the other hand, has pursued minilateralism as its foreign policy option to counter India's dominance and to overcome the impasse in SAARC. Consequently, there has been a security dilemma which has triggered the arms race in the region. Although minilateralism provides a more effective forum for negotiations and cooperation than multilateralism, it raises new problems of coordination and may lead to further fragmentation of South Asia.

Keywords: Minilateralism, South Asia, Regional Security, Indian Foreign Policy, India-Pakistan Conflict, China Factor, Regional Cooperation, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Multilateralism.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations Used in the Thesis	
Abbreviation	Full Form
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BBIN	Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
UN	United Nations
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
SAFTA	South Asian Free Trade Area
MFN	Most Favoured Nation

SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
GVCs	Global Value Chains
WTO	World Trade Organization
LOC	Line of Control

Introduction

1. Relevance and Novelty of the Research

Close to 1.9 billion live in South Asia - that's around one out of every four people on Earth - but economic ties here stay weak compared to other parts of the globe. SAARC, set up to boost teamwork between eight nations, barely functions after India pulled back from a meeting in Islamabad in 2016 due to worries over attacks launched across borders. Years without progress have led some countries to try tighter partnerships instead - fewer players, quicker moves. New formats like BIMSTEC and the BBIN transport deal now draw attention, focusing only where agreement feels possible. These small steps echo a wider trend: picking narrow goals with willing partners rather than waiting for big consensus that never comes.^[1]

What makes this work different? It looks at how SAARC weakened while small groupings grew stronger - not as two separate stories, but linked. Most studies keep these apart. Here they meet under one lens, using ideas from Liberal Institutionalism, Realism, and Constructivism, along with New Regionalism Theory. Another twist: it brings in voices often missed, like those of Russian experts such as Sergey Lunev from MGIMO and Natalia Zamaraeva from the Institute of Oriental Studies.^[2]

2. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

What drives this thesis? A look at how deep-rooted structures limit SAARC's impact. Instead of broad claims, it turns to small-group cooperation in South Asia. Not every path works the same way. One aim stands out - examining why larger efforts stall. Close-knit arrangements take center stage here. The region has tried many forms of collaboration. This work does not cheer one model over another. It watches how power, history, and trust shape outcomes. Smaller circles of nations appear more agile. Can they achieve what bigger groups cannot? Evidence points in several directions. Each case tells a different story. Attention stays fixed on real actions, not promises. Past patterns matter just as much as current moves. What emerges is neither triumph nor failure. Just a clearer picture of what fits:

- (1) Examine the theoretical foundations of regionalism and minilateralism in International Relations;
- (2) Evaluate SAARC's historical achievements and structural limitations;
- (3) Identify political, economic, and security challenges undermining SAARC's effectiveness;
- (4) Analyse the emergence and performance of BIMSTEC and BBIN as minilateral alternatives;
- (5) Develop scenarios for the future of regional cooperation in South Asia.

3. Research Object and Subject

Nowhere else does regional collaboration face such tangled hurdles as in South Asia. Behind every effort to cooperate lies a web of constraints baked into SAARC's structure. Instead of broad agreements, smaller groups have started working around them. These tight-knit arrangements step in where larger ones stall. Function follows form when old models fail to deliver results.

4. Research Methods and Methodology

This study uses both numbers and words to explore its topic. Instead of just one way, it layers different ways to look closer. First comes a close reading of how SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN differ in structure and function. From there, government papers, meeting outcomes, and joint statements get broken down line by line. What might happen later guides another piece - imagining paths ahead based on current patterns. Judging how well these groups perform leans on several clear benchmarks, not just one measure. Data for number-based parts come through sources like the World Bank, IMF, UNCTAD, and records kept by SAARC itself. Ideas from Keohane and Nye shape much of how all this gets interpreted - their early thinking still casts long shadows.^[3]

5. Theoretical Framework

Starting off, the study builds from Liberal Institutionalism - this one zeroes in on how institutions help solve shared challenges among nations. Power dynamics take center stage when Realism steps into view, where national interests drive decisions more than rules do. Then there is Constructivism, which looks closely at beliefs, identities, and how regions form through cultural understanding, not just treaties or force. On top of that comes New Regionalism Theory, seeing regional ties as layered developments involving political, social, and cultural threads, going much further than trade alone.

6. Periodization

Three time frames make up the research. First comes 1985 to 2000, when SAARC began and slowly built its structure. Then from 2000 to 2016, hopes ran high while talks on SAFTA moved forward. Lastly, 2016 through 2025 looks at how SAARC stopped working in practice, even as smaller regional efforts grew faster.

7. Scientific Novelty

One way this work adds to past studies is by comparing SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN through one consistent measure of how well institutions perform - something not done before. Instead of following Western viewpoints only, it brings in insights from Russian academics, fitting them into a format accessible to English readers. Rather than just describing current setups, it sketches out three separate paths ahead for how cooperation in South Asia might evolve. Earlier research lacked such forward-looking structure, making this part stand apart despite its cautious tone. Each piece connects, yet stands alone, building up a fuller picture

without relying on grand claims. What emerges is not prediction but possibility, shaped by logic rather than assumption. The approach stays grounded, even when looking years ahead. No single point dominates, still together they shift understanding slightly. By mixing angles that were once kept apart, the analysis gains depth without growing bulky. Its strength lies less in boldness, more in careful linking of parts others left unjoined.

8. Practical Significance

Though focused on South Asia, outcomes here touch wider circles. Policymakers across national offices might find what follows useful. Not just capitals - regional hubs like SAARC and BIMSTEC could apply parts too. Global agencies working in development may see parallels. Diplomatic teams can draw on the scenario models laid out. Planning ahead gets easier with these structures in place. Russia's stance in Southern and Southeastern regions gains context through this work. With ties deepening to India and Bangladesh under BRICS, Moscow has reasons to pay attention.

9. Structure of the Work

Here comes the layout. First up, Chapter 1 lays down ideas about regional groups and small alliances. Following that, a look at SAARC - how it started, what worked, where it fell short - is unpacked in Chapter 2. Then things shift. Chapter 3 digs into why SAARC struggles while tighter coalitions gain ground. Next, Chapter 4 weighs chances for teamwork across South Asia. Wrap-up time brings practical advice plus paths worth exploring later.

10. Brief Bibliography Overview

Foundational texts in International Relations shape the references here - Keohane with Nye, Wendt's ideas, Ruggie's contributions stand out. From scholars focused on South Asia, insights come through Mohan, Ganguly, also Khatri. When it comes to Russia's view of the area, Lunev offers perspective, joined by Zamaraeva and Pankova. Data used throughout leans heavily on sources like the World Bank, IMF figures plus UNCTAD records, while reports from SAARC and BIMSTEC add further detail.^[4]

11. Review of the Scholarly Literature

Ways of thinking about global ties show up in four loose groups, each shaping what comes next. Out of nowhere, early ideas on world order start to matter - especially how bodies help nations work together when no one is in charge. A key moment arrives through Keohane's insight: shared systems cut hurdles for teamwork across borders, a view sharpened with Nye while studying tangled national links. That idea becomes quiet scaffolding beneath later studies of regions sticking together. Then Ruggie steps in, framing fairness-driven group efforts marked by open access, equal treatment, and long-term give-and-take - a standard others now compare newer, smaller alliances against. Elsewhere, Wendt flips attention toward meaning-making itself, showing how beliefs shape state behavior, making room to see why trust lags in South Asia due to who sees whom as what kind of partner.

Another source comes from studies focused on regions and how they connect. Starting with Europe, thinkers like Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch introduced ideas such as spillover and security communities - concepts still shaping discussions today. Moving beyond Europe, scholars including Björn Hettne, Fredrik Söderbaum, and Andrew Hurrell shifted attention to different parts

of the world, especially the Global South. Their take shows regional ties are complex, shaped by history and context instead of following one fixed model. Because of this shift, understanding South Asia's pattern of cooperation becomes possible without measuring it against Europe's example. Small groups tackling specific problems form the core idea here. This concept builds on early work shaped by Moisés Naím, then expanded through writings by Miles Kahler alongside contributions from C. Raja Mohan. Ideas about such arrangements offer a lens for what follows. Though not always named directly, their thinking runs beneath the surface. What emerged was less broad alliance talk, more targeted cooperation. These shifts matter because they reshape how countries engage. Focus narrowed, purpose sharpened. From those roots grows the framework used now.

One part of the research draws from writings focused squarely on South Asia. Instead of broad theories, it leans on detailed studies - Sumit Ganguly explores chances for peace alongside tensions between India and Pakistan. C. Raja Mohan looks into how India shapes its foreign moves through selective partnerships. Sridhar Khatri examines SAARC, not just as an idea but as a structure trying to take root. Christophe Jaffrelot traces how power shifts inside Pakistan over time. These authors form a backbone for understanding politics in the area. What sets this project apart? It includes academic work written in Russian, produced within Russia - a layer often missing elsewhere. For instance, Sergey Lunev at MGIMO analyzes South Asia's role amid global powers. At the Institute of Oriental Studies, Natalia Zamaraeva dives into what drives Pakistan's defense thinking. Experts from IMEMO assess how safety concerns are stitched across the subcontinent. Their insights tilt differently than those found in most English sources. They also mirror how deeply Moscow now watches this corner of the world.

One way into the topic comes through records made by global agencies and state groups. Numbers and studies from the World Bank, IMF, UNCTAD, along with work from the Asian Development Bank, offer hard data on commerce, links between nations, growth - this backs up real-world points in the argument. Papers from SAARC and BIMSTEC offices - founding texts, meeting statements, yearly summaries, deals across fields - form raw material for studying how institutions change. These four paths of written work bring tools for thinking, examples to weigh against each other, knowledge tied to South Asia, plus facts pulled from observation - all shaping what follows. Missing so far has been any close, joined-up look at why SAARC weakened while small-group cooperation grew stronger, seen ahead of time, using ideas not just from Europe or America but also insights drawn from Russia.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Foundations of Regionalism and Minilateralism

1.1 The Concept of Regionalism in International Relations

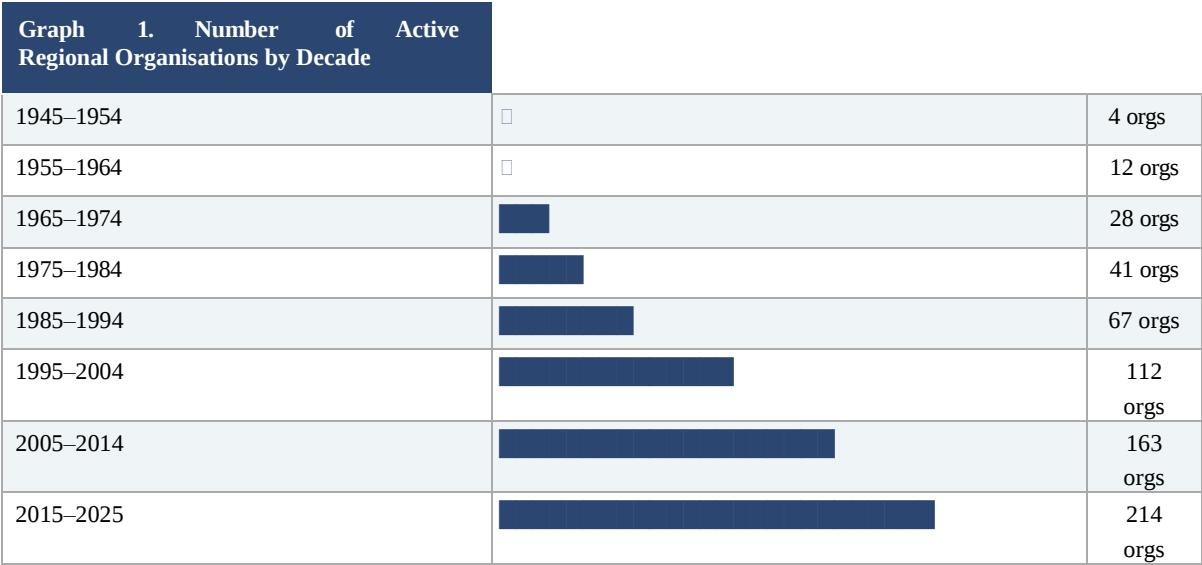
Definition of Regionalism

Out here, politics shape how countries near one another start working together - sometimes loosely, sometimes tightly. Close-by nations might set up special deals so they treat each other differently than outsiders, especially when trading or handling safety concerns. These ties come alive through official systems or quiet understandings built over time. Instead of waiting around for things to happen, leaders often push these efforts on purpose -

that’s what gets called regionalism. Meanwhile, something else bubbles up without planning: connections growing just because economies link and people interact more; that is labeled regionalization. One comes from choices made at the top, the other emerges quietly from daily life across borders.^[5]

Now things look quite different than right after World War II. At first, regions banded together mostly over fears of conflict - take NATO or the Warsaw Pact - both shaped by the split between superpowers back then. Trade-focused cooperation started standing out once Europe formed its Economic Community in ’57, while poorer nations experimented with special deals on imports during the next two decades. In South Asia, concerns about power imbalances mixed with hopes for shared growth - one reason SAARC came into being in 1985, offering smaller countries a

Growth of Regional Organisations (1945–2025)



Graph 1. Growth of active regional intergovernmental organisations by decade. Source: Compiled from Union of International Associations (UIA), Yearbook of International Organizations, 2024 edition.

Classical and New Regionalism

Out of Europe’s postwar shifts came ideas about how regions might stick together. One idea, shaped by Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch, leaned on real-world steps toward unity seen in places like Western Europe. When people start working together in one area - say energy or trade - it can quietly pull in other areas too, thanks to what Haas called spillover. Cooperation isn’t just deals between governments; it spreads through habits, networks, even loyalties. Deutsch looked closer at trust, noticing how constant contact among nations could build bonds strong enough to rule out war. Over time, these ties form something he named a security community. Later thinkers questioned whether such models fit everywhere. Scholars like Björn Hettne, Frederick Söderbaum, and Andrew Hurrell argued that copying Europe misses the point. Their approach, often labeled New Regionalism Theory, sees regional efforts as rooted in local politics, histories, and power shapes. Integration doesn’t always move forward smoothly - or at all. Some forms stay shallow, others twist in unexpected directions, depending on who is involved and why.^[8]

South Asia fits better under New Regionalism Theory. Its sense of belonging isn’t fixed, past tensions shape current politics between nations, while uneven strength among countries - India holds about 80 percent of the area’s economic output - pushes dynamics far from Europe’s example. Thinkers like Amitav Acharya used a

space where India’s influence might be balanced through group rules.^[6]

Evolution of Regional Cooperation

Regional teamwork changed in three main phases. After World War Two, until 1970, nations focused on safety deals along with small trade groups - mainly in Western Europe and parts of Latin America. Then came a shift: between 1970 and 1990, new regional bodies popped up across developing regions, like SAARC formed in 1985, ASEAN which started earlier but grew wider during that time, and the Gulf Cooperation Council launched in 1981. From 1990 onward, older alliances got stronger even while smaller treaties spread; at the same time, community networks and independent groups began shaping regional work more than before.^[7]

social take on NRT to reveal how missing mutual trust slowed SAARC’s growth.^[9]

1.2 Theoretical Approaches to Regional Cooperation

Liberal Institutionalism

Even though states look out for themselves, Robert Keohane’s ideas suggest institutions help them work together by cutting red tape, sharing facts, because trust grows when rules exist. Anarchy stays, yet how nations act shifts slightly thanks to these frameworks. In the case of SAARC, one might expect progress just from having meetings, charters, offices, since structure alone could nudge collaboration forward slowly. Reality shows some results - SAFTA arrived in 2006, so did a Social Charter - but follow-through keeps falling short. That mismatch, where paper strength doesn’t match real impact, hints that believing only in institutions misses deeper problems.^[10]

Realism

Power shapes what happens in regions, say realist theories, especially those focused on structure. Across South Asia, one fact stands out: India holds most of the weight. Nearly eight out of every ten dollars made regionally come from India, three-quarters of defence money spent there flows from its budget, and it shares land borders with every other country in SAARC. From this angle,

nations like Pakistan and Nepal see the group not just as cooperation but as a way to balance influence when rules are set together. Nowhere is the hesitation clearer than in New Delhi’s sporadic coolness toward SAARC, as it leans on one-on-one deals that amplify its built-in leverage. Instead of pooling strength, distrust runs deep - especially between India and Pakistan - clash realists like Mearsheimer pin on raw contest for dominance, freezing cooperation at every turn. [11]

Constructivism

Starts with ideas about how nations build their world together, constructivism follows Wendt’s point that order comes not from rules but from what countries believe. In South Asia, things like who people think they are - and who others seem to be - shape political ties more than treaties. Though Southeast Asia grew closeness by sticking to quiet diplomacy and group agreement inside ASEAN, similar bonds never took root across the subcontinent. Divided pasts, especially the split between India and Pakistan, keep old wounds alive. Big views on history clash, one side seeing itself one way, another differently. There is no common sense of safety, no habit of mutual trust when dealing with threats. Because beliefs pull governments apart instead of drawing them together, working as a region stays out of reach. Some analysts based in Russia, including Pankova, note that clashing ideals deepen these gaps even further.^[12]

New Regionalism Theory

Back in the 1990s, scholars began questioning old models of regional unity after noticing how differently regions formed outside Europe. Instead of following one rigid path, new thinking saw cooperation as shaped by history, power shifts, and various players acting at once. Unlike earlier ideas pushing toward single outcomes like trade blocs or federations, this view dropped any preset destination. In South Asia’s case, meaning comes not from copying others but from recognizing unique local forces driving

choices among states. Beyond governments, people started looking closer at unseen influences - migrant communities, activist groups, industry lobbies - that quietly help shape ties across borders.^[13]

1.3 The Concept and Characteristics of Minilateralism

Definition of Minilateralism

Start small, act fast - that idea took shape when Moisés Naím wrote about global cooperation in 2009.

His piece in Foreign Policy suggested real change comes not from big groups but tight clusters of nations. Picture fewer players at the table, each one essential to cracking a single issue. These compact teams form around clear goals, skipping broad representation for actual results. Where large forums aim to include everyone, these smaller setups work differently: they leave out members if their presence slows things down. While institutions like the WTO or UN Security Council stall under complexity, this leaner path gains attention among thinkers and planners. Even SAARC shows how wide circles struggle now, given today’s scattered power lines across the world.^[14]

Difference between Multilateralism and Minilateralism

One way to look at how countries work together comes from John Ruggie’s idea of multilateralism - it leans on treating nations as one big group, no special treatment for any single one, plus counting on shared gains over time instead of quick trades. Where that approach spreads wide, minilateralism narrows down - picking certain countries while leaving others out, shaping deals around particular topics, sometimes trading favors directly. Because it skips equal access, groups apart from each other, swaps help right away, it moves faster yet feels unfair to those left behind. The trade-off shows up clearly: speed versus acceptance among all nations. What works smoothly for insiders can seem closed off to everyone else.^[15]

Table 1. Multilateralism vs. Minilateralism: Comparative Framework		
Dimension	Multilateralism	Minilateralism
Membership	Universal/Inclusive	Limited/Selective
Decision-making	Consensus-based	Majority/Veto-limited
Scope	Comprehensive agenda	Issue-specific
Flexibility	Low (consensus veto)	High
Legitimacy	High (broad mandate)	Contested
Speed of action	Slow	Relatively fast
Examples	WTO, SAARC, UN	G7, BBIN, Quad
Russia's engagement	UN Security Council, SCO	BRICS, Arctic Council

Table 1. Comparative framework: multilateralism vs. minilateralism. Source: Compiled by the author based on Ruggie (1993), Naím (2009), and Lunev (2020)

Global Examples of Minilateral Cooperation

Out there, small groups of nations are stepping up where bigger talks stall. Take the Quad - U.S., Japan, Australia, India - it came together because ships and claims in the South China Sea got too tense. Instead of waiting for consensus among dozens, these four share intelligence, run drills, keep sea lanes open. On trade, twelve Pacific-bordering countries shaped the CPTPP after one major player stepped back; tighter circle meant sharper rules on digital flows, labor, environment. Big meetings often drown out detail, but here precision stuck. Climate efforts? Same

pattern: seventeen heavy-emitting countries meet quietly through the MEF, pushing deals that move faster than U.N. votes allow. Even the G20 fits this mold - not every country gets a seat, just those whose economies tilt the scale when decisions land.^[16]

Distribution of Global Minilateral Frameworks by Issue Area

Pie Chart 1. Global Minilateral Frameworks by Issue Area (2025)			
Category	Share (%)	Visualization	Value
Trade & Economics	34.0%	■■■■■■■■■	34%
Security & Defence	28.0%	■■■■■■■	28%
Climate & Environment	15.0%	■■■■■	15%
Technology & Digital	12.0%	■■■	12%
Health	6.0%	■■	6%
Other	5.0%	■	5%

Pie Chart 1. Distribution of global minilateral frameworks by issue area, 2025. Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Council on Foreign Relations Global Governance Monitor, 2025.

Minilateralism and the Theory of Club Goods

One reason minilateral deals have grown popular lies in how they fit with ideas about club goods. Not everyone pays but all still gain when it comes to things like shared defence or open markets

- typical traits of global public goods. These features often lead bigger groups to stall, since some countries take without giving much back. Think of SAARC, where eight nations, very different in power, need full consensus just to act. That idea from Mancur Olson fits here: larger collectives fail easier because effort outweighs reward for each one. Smaller clubs dodge this trap by choosing only those who want similar outcomes. Benefits then stay closer among fewer partners, making cooperation less messy than broad agreements ever could.

Looking at things through a club-goods lens shows what gets gained and lost when countries shift toward small-group deals. Fewer members mean quicker talks, fewer blocked decisions, easier tracking of who follows rules - though fairness and wide inclusion often suffer. Take how Pakistan isn't part of BIMSTEC: cutting out one stubborn holdout opens space for progress on shared tasks. Still, ignoring such a key rival keeps the group from tackling the deeper tension between India and Pakistan shaping everything nearby. So instead of fixing deep-rooted barriers to unity across South Asia, these tight coalitions just sidestep them - scoring wins in practical areas while big-power standoffs stay frozen.^[56]

That same thinking shows why small groups and larger ones stick around together, not replacing each other. Since benefits have limits, one tight-knit team hardly covers everything needed across a region; so countries build several layers of cooperation, each shaped by specific goals and participants. Out of this comes a patchwork setup: BIMSTEC works on links between Bay of Bengal nations and terrorism responses, BBIN pushes transport ties among four eager neighbors, while SAARC - even if inactive - still holds symbolic weight as the sole space where all eight South Asian states belong. So the real point isn't debating if smaller circles wipe out broader talks, but seeing how both move alongside each other in one shared setting.

The Spaghetti Bowl of Overlapping Memberships in South Asia

Tangled deals pile up, creating a mess economist Jagdish Bhagwati once called a "spaghetti bowl" of conflicting promises. Across

South Asia, that image hits home - India shows up in SAARC, SAFTA, BBIN, BIMSTEC, the Quad, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and BRICS, each bringing its own rules on where goods come from, how fights are settled, and who gets to decide what. Take Bangladesh - it joins in SAARC, SAFTA, BBIN, and BIMSTEC. Nepal and Bhutan? They stick with SAARC, SAFTA, and BBIN. Sri Lanka lines up behind SAARC, SAFTA, and BIMSTEC. Meanwhile, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan mostly stay within SAARC and SAFTA alone. Such uneven involvement opens doors even as it sparks tensions, something rigid theories often miss when they fixate only on institutions.^[57]

Friction shows up not just in paperwork but in power plays too. Because trade deals overlap, each with different origin rules, businesses face higher costs tracking where products come from - rules change based on the deal used. Smaller countries' customs teams, stretched thin, find it hard to juggle several systems running side by side. In the case of Bhutan and Nepal, both reliant on moving goods through India, real access depends more on New Delhi's readiness to open routes than what treaties say on paper - a commitment that has shifted over time. So the messy web of procedures ends up mirroring the imbalance already seen in regional decision-making.

One reason things keep moving? Some groups share members, so work does not stop when one group stalls. If talks freeze - like SAARC did years ago - countries simply move meetings elsewhere instead of starting over. After 2016, leaders began meeting under BIMSTEC, skipping the stalemate by gathering where certain blockers were missing. Shared participation across forums means choices exist; some grow more useful depending on who resists what at any given time.

Comparative Lessons from the ASEAN Way

One look at South Asia's push for unity tends to bring up ASEAN, a long-standing example from the developing world. Built on quiet talks rather than rigid rules, its model leans on agreement among equals, avoids meddling in domestic matters, moves slowly by design - comfort first. Critics say results often lack depth, that strongmen get cover behind process. Yet somehow, nations once wary of each other now keep talking, have kept guns silent across borders for over fifty years.^[58]

Out of nowhere, differences between SAARC and others start to stand out. Born from nations stepping away from colonial rule, each group distrusted outside control, built decisions on agreement, respected borders without question. Still, only one managed something rare: a quiet bond forming among members, a kind of belonging felt across countries. That feeling? Missing entirely in the South Asian example. Timing played a part. So did trust. Geography nudged things too. Not every beginning leads where you expect. One reason ASEAN has no dominant member like India lies in how it began - fear of communism spreading shaped its creation. Because nations there wanted ties with Western investors, working together made sense for them. In South Asia, things differ sharply. Rivalry between two countries armed with nuclear weapons runs deep, coloring each regional effort they join.

One thing South Asia might take away isn't about copying ASEAN exactly - situations are too different - but small steps, quiet efforts focused on real tasks can slowly build confidence and lasting frameworks. In 2022, when BIMSTEC took up a charter similar to ASEAN's, brought in Thailand along with Myanmar, then turned attention toward actual work across sectors instead of big speeches, it looked like a deliberate move to borrow parts of how ASEAN operates into the Bay of Bengal area. Success for this effort hinges on sticking to steady, non-dramatic collaboration - the kind that set ASEAN apart from regional groups that struggled.^[59]

Critiques and Limitations of Minilateralism

Minilateral efforts come with real problems, something a fair analysis cannot ignore. A core concern? Legitimacy falls short when countries impacted are left out on purpose. Even if small groups act fast, their choices carry less weight than those made through inclusive global systems. Without broad approval, results feel imposed rather than agreed upon. Countries shut out might see such deals as biased, refusing to back them later. Others watching from afar could suspect these tight coalitions serve narrow goals under the guise of cooperation. Take BIMSTEC - because Pakistan has no seat there, any security plan shaped by it skips over one key rivalry that threatens wider war in South Asia.^[60]

A different issue ties into how groups split apart, then pick forums like shoppers hunting deals. When too many small agreements overlap, they blur the bigger picture of how regions should work together. Stronger countries might jump between these setups, using each when it helps them most, shifting tactics on a whim. Some observers point out that this habit could weaken larger organizations meant for everyone, the kind built on fairness and broad reach - needed badly when facing shared threats like rising heat waves, disease outbreaks, or rivers crossing borders. For South Asia, the real task sits quietly beneath: let tighter partnerships help here and there, yet never trade away the wider circle of teamwork that only SAARC holds, slow as it may move.

Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, and the Limits of Spillover

Starting with small tasks, people began thinking about how nations might work together more closely. Instead of big treaties or sweeping rules, progress came through practical teamwork on specific issues. One such thinker was David Mitrany, whose ideas shaped early views on this path. Progress happened not by planning everything at once but by solving problems step by step. As groups cooperated in narrow fields, trust built slowly. Skills grew. So did the readiness to try similar efforts nearby. Later, Ernst Haas took that idea further. He called it spillover - success in one zone pushing activity into others. Each gain pulled along new ones almost like a chain reaction. This process seemed real when

looking back at Europe. What started in heavy industries stretched outward? It moved into trade, money matters, even politics. Over years, what looked theoretical found proof in actual events.

A closer look at South Asia cuts against the idea that small steps lead to big change. Though groups under SAARC worked long years on farming, weather tracking, health, and handling crises, those efforts did not open doors where money and power sit - trade rules stayed tight, trust on security never grew. What played out smoothly in postwar Europe hit a wall here, because everyday issues give way fast when national pride and old tensions take charge. Even strong progress on practical tasks could not shift how India and Pakistan weigh their deepest interests. That missing leap fits what New Regionalism Theory warns about: deeper ties need ground that welcomes them, a mood of openness and shared sense, things clearly missing across this region.

What this means for now matters a lot. When spillover isn't automatic, counting on small group efforts like BIMSTEC to build strong political unity doesn't hold up. Progress in areas like transport links or fighting terrorism might happen, yet still fail to trigger broader merging of policies - something older theories expected. Evidence from South Asia suggests something narrower instead: practical teamwork brings actual benefits, limited though they may be, lifting living conditions and safety in certain fields without altering how nations relate at their core..

Hegemonic Stability and the Provision of Regional Public Goods

One idea about South Asia's regional ties looks at how strong countries help supply shared benefits. When it comes to group advantages like steady trade systems, stability often follows if one powerful nation takes on more than its fair portion of expense - this view shaped by Kindleberger and Gilpin globally. Zoom into a smaller area, and similar logic appears: smooth cooperation might depend on a leading local state offering wider market access, funding common bodies, even accepting near-term losses for bigger future gains. Such support, uneven but deliberate, could keep the whole setup running.

India clearly stands out in South Asia, making up most of the region's people, wealth, and armed strength. Still, it has often held back from leading, hesitant to take on the burdens that come with guiding others closely. Instead of stepping forward, it worries that group efforts could limit its freedom instead of boosting its reach. Neighboring countries, meanwhile, watch carefully, uneasy about being overshadowed, turning to SAARC as a way to keep India checked through shared rules. Their caution clashes with what strong leadership usually demands - willingness to act decisively even when others resist. Because of this, the area lacks clear direction: the strongest nation pauses before acting, while weaker ones pause before trusting. Without one force pulling things together firmly, deep cooperation stays out of reach. Lately, though, India has begun working more actively in tighter groups like BIMSTEC, choosing spaces where its weight shows best, yet avoids triggering resistance from key rivals.

Identity, Norms, and the Social Construction of Region

It starts with how people shape what counts as a region, not just maps. Not lines on terrain, but talk, habits, stories build these spaces over time. When folks act like a place means something, then it does. South Asia, seen as one block? That idea came late. Many there still do not see neighbors as part of an us. Governments rarely speak as if they share fate. Compare that to Europe or Southeast Asia - those places grew stronger bonds through

repeated agreements, symbols, everyday trust. Without such glue here, joint efforts tend to stall. Belonging matters when countries must rely on each other. Words create realities, even in politics. What feels natural now once had to be invented elsewhere. This gap shapes outcomes more than diplomats admit. Meaning grows slowly where no one tends it.

Looking back at the 1947 split shapes much of what follows here. That division drew new borders over Kashmir, yet it also planted rival stories nations tell about themselves - stories where India and Pakistan see their very being defined against one another. Because schools repeat them, because news outlets echo them, because leaders keep invoking them, these tales stay alive, feeding distrust that passes from parent to child. So far apart do they stand, common ground feels nearly out of reach. Scholars in Russia, especially those linked to the Institute of Oriental Studies, point instead to deeper rifts - not just politics, but clashing worldviews - that make unity harder still. Because of constructivism, this work points out that problems blocking South Asia's collaboration go beyond just strength and money matters. Hidden beneath are deeper issues tied to ideas, shaped by how nations see who they are and how they view neighbors. So lasting change in how these countries come together won't follow from shifting influence alone. Neither will it rise simply from adjusted goals. Instead, shared ways of belonging must slowly take new form. That kind of shift happens across lifetimes, not between elections..

Minilateralism, Multilateralism, and the Spectrum of Cooperation

Minilateralism is not as multilateralism's rival, yet somewhere along a sliding scale of how nations work together - starting with just two countries making deals, stretching all the way to every nation on Earth joining forces. On this line you find agreements between pairs, then small clusters like BBIN involving three or four neighbors. Further ahead sit tighter groups such as BIMSTEC, followed by wider regional bodies including SAARC. At the far edge stand worldwide networks: think United Nations or WTO. Effectiveness often grows when fewer hands are involved; inclusion tends to grow when more join. Every setup balances those pulls differently, none escapes the tension. The shape cooperation takes depends on which value feels more urgent at the moment.

Cooperation in South Asia makes more sense when seen on a scale, not as an either-or choice. Instead of picking one path - multilateral or small-group deals - the countries keep adjusting how they work together, depending on what suits them best at the time. When it comes to specific issues, each government picks partners based on advantage, not habit. India leans heavily into one-on-one ties or tight clusters where its weight gives it control, avoiding situations where opponents could block progress. Smaller nations tend to push back by favoring broader groups, using shared rules to balance against dominance. These clashing tendencies do not cancel out - they feed into a patchwork pattern of alliances that shifts with every new challenge. Out of constant tug-and-pull among varied formats emerges a complex structure, neither uniform nor accidental. This tangled layering, shaped by competing strategies, points ahead - to what may become regional order without unity.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

Right off, Chapter 1 lays down ideas needed later on. Not just about power plays anymore, regionalism now includes commerce,

culture, along with groups outside government reach. Instead of one-size-fits-all theories, it looked at four: Liberal Institutionalism, Realism, Constructivism, then New Regionalism Theory - each showing another angle on how South Asia connects regionally. Minilateralism pops up here as a workable fix when broad international setups fall short. From this point forward, the way things are compared in this chapter shapes what comes next in real-world case studies.

Chapter 2. Saarc and Regional Cooperation in South Asia

2.1 Historical Development of SAARC

Background of SAARC's Establishment

Back then, in the late 1970s, talk of joining forces across South Asia began to surface. A push came from Bangladesh's leader at the time, Ziaur Rahman, who floated the notion of a group where nations could meet and discuss ways to grow their economies together. Instead of going nowhere, the suggestion started to take root as years passed by. Countries in the region were looking for ways to handle common struggles around progress and growth. Working side by side offered a path to ease friction between neighbors. It also gave them more voice when speaking up on global stages. This move echoed ideas championed during the days of the Non-Aligned Movement. Many poorer countries wanted stronger ties among themselves, without leaning on wealthier powers. Meanwhile, the smaller players - Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives - noticed something else. By shaping rules within a joint setup, they might offset India's larger influence simply due to size and position.^[17]

Back in December 1985, talks finished up in Dhaka where leaders from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka met between the 7th and 8th to sign the SAARC Charter - this step made the group official. Later on, Afghanistan joined during 2007, raising the count of members to eight. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had been watching how SAARC unfolded, especially because it shared close ties with India; after the USSR dissolved, Russia kept paying attention too. As pointed out by Professor Lunev from MGIMO University, experts there saw promise in SAARC around the mid-1980s, thinking it might bring some balance amid Cold War tensions.^[18]

Looking back at the start of SAARC means seeing it through the lens of early 1980s global tensions. With Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Cold War pressures rising across the Indian Ocean, and fresh memories of the 1971 conflict that led to Bangladesh becoming its own country, the stage was already charged when the group began taking shape. Instead of coming from India - the dominant force nearby - it emerged from Bangladesh, where leader Ziaur Rahman pushed for a regional setup in 1980, revealing how weaker nations wanted ways to balance influence through shared rules and talks. Hesitation followed from both India and Pakistan; each suspected the other could twist the organization into a tool for gain. That quiet doubt built in from the beginning has stayed close ever since.

Founding Principles and Objectives

One goal sits at the heart of SAARC's purpose - lifting lives across South Asia by making daily existence better. Growth in economies, societies, and cultures moves faster when efforts join together through shared direction. Independence grows stronger when

nations rely more on one another within the group. Trust builds slowly, yet steadily, as countries come to grasp what others face. Working hand-in-hand happens in areas like science, education, health, trade, and technology without needing grand announcements. Ties widen beyond the region too, linking with other emerging nations facing similar paths. Voices align in global gatherings whenever topics affect everyone equally. Yet one rule shapes how little gets said - disputes between two members stay outside meetings. Designed to shield talks from tension especially between India and Pakistan, it instead leaves many subjects untouched. What was meant to protect unity ends up narrowing what can be done?^[19]

Organisational Structure

At the top, national leaders meet face-to-face as the main decision-makers. Below them, foreign ministers gather to shape policy direction. One level lower, senior diplomats keep things moving between summits. Set up in Kathmandu back in 1987, the secretariat handles paperwork yet holds little power of its own. Every choice made needs full group agreement. Because just one country can block anything, progress often stalls. Even though everyone gets an equal say, that rule slows everything down. Over time, what seemed fair became a major roadblock.^[20]

Table 2. SAARC Organisational Structure				
Body		Composition	Meeting Frequency	Functions
Heads of State Summit	8 heads of state/government	Annual (in principle)	Supreme decision-making, strategic direction	
Council of Ministers	Foreign Ministers	Biannual	Policy review, implementation oversight	
Standing Committee	Foreign Secretaries	As required	Operationalisation of decisions	
SAARC Secretariat	Secretary-General staff +	Permanent	Administrative coordination, documentation	
Programming Committee	Senior officials	Biannual	Budget, calendar, agenda	
Technical Committees	Expert officials	Sector-specific	Sectoral cooperation coordination	

Table 2. SAARC organisational structure. Source: Compiled by the author based on SAARC Secretariat (2023) and Khatri (2006).

2.2 Achievements of SAARC

Economic Cooperation

One big step by SAARC was setting up the South Asian Free Trade Area, known as SAFTA - agreed

upon in 2004, active from 2006 - with a promise to lower import taxes between members until they vanish, though some goods stayed protected under national lists. This deal showed real intent toward working together economically, yet actual progress feels thin. Even now, trade among these countries makes up just about 5 to 7 percent of their overall commerce; contrast that with ASEAN’s quarter and Europe’s more than sixty percent. Hidden roadblocks like non-tax hurdles, tangled certification needs, plus weak systems for moving goods smoothly across borders have dulled SAFTA’s effect far too much.^[21]

Social and Cultural Cooperation

Out of its efforts, gains in culture and society stand out most clearly. Hosting events that cross borders, the cultural hub in Sri

Lanka builds quiet bridges through art and tradition. Education ties grow stronger too, thanks to a university in India welcoming youth from every nation involved. Agreements on fairness, lifting people from hardship, and handling emergencies have taken shape over time. When storms, quakes, or rising waters strike, the disaster office - active since 2006 - steps into motion across countries hit at once. Real work shows here, though it often gets overlooked next to bigger financial goals.^[22]

Regional Development Initiatives

One step at a time, SAARC rolled out regional programs like the SAARC Development Fund back in 2010, seeded with 300 million U.S. dollars by its members. Money flows through it for work on links between countries, better living conditions, and shared growth efforts. Still, cash promises often go unmet, while actual progress drags far behind what was mapped out. Set up to support deeper ties, SARSO handles standards and SARCO deals with dispute resolution across borders. Yet neither body gets nearly enough backing to match what they’re supposed to do.^[23]

Intra-Regional Trade Comparison (2022)



European Union		62%
ASEAN		25%
MERCOSUR		14%
African Union		16%
SAARC		6%
GCC		9%

Graph 2. Intra-regional trade as percentage of total trade for major regional groupings, 2022. Source: World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), 2023; UNCTAD, 2023.

2.3 Structural and Institutional Limitations of SAARC

Consensus-Based Decision-Making

One big rule shapes how SAARC works - decisions need everyone to say yes. While the EU often uses Majority votes, and ASEAN allows looser ways to decide things, this group sticks to full agreement. That means each country holds total power to block moves. Even tiny Maldives, home to half a million people, gets the same weight as larger nations. So does Pakistan, especially when tensions with India run high. Because of this setup, progress crawls. Ideas pass only if nobody objects. Over time, that pushes choices down to what all can barely accept.^[24]

Weak Institutional Mechanisms

Year after year, the SAARC Secretariat operates with fewer resources than it needs. Its yearly funding hovers around five million dollars - far below ASEAN's twenty-two million or the

vast budgets seen in European Union administration. Instead of steady leadership, the role of Secretary-General shifts every three years between countries involved, limiting long-term influence. Without strong tools to track progress, follow-through remains weak across initiatives. There is no formal system in place for settling disagreements like those found in global bodies such as the WTO or within ASEAN frameworks.^[25]

Financial and Administrative Constraints

Money troubles at SAARC come from how it's built and how nations act. Because payments tie to each country's economic size, India gives most. Yet every nation has sometimes held back cash when due, leaving holes in the funds needed to run things. Without a proper court or official status under international law, the group struggles to make solid deals beyond its circle. Discipline slips too, since there is no way to enforce rules when members ignore duties. Running smoothly becomes harder without clear tools to hold anyone accountable.^[26]

Table 3. SAARC vs. ASEAN: Institutional Comparison		
Indicator	SAARC	ASEAN
Year established	1985	1967
Member states	8	10
Secretariat budget (USD)	~5 million	~22 million
Decision-making	Consensus	Consultation/Consensus
Dispute resolution	None	ASEAN DSM
Legal personality	No	Yes (ASEAN Charter 2008)
Intra-regional trade	~6%	~25%
Last successful Summit	2016 (Kathmandu)	2023 (Jakarta)

Table 3. Institutional comparison: SAARC vs. ASEAN. Source: Compiled by the author from ASEAN Secretariat (2023) and SAARC Secretariat (2023).

The SAARC Summit Cycle and Its Interruptions

At the top of SAARC's structure stands the Summit of Heads of State or Government, meant at first to meet once each year. Yet in reality, these gatherings have happened on an inconsistent basis, with delays themselves showing how well the group functions. From 1985 to 2014, just eighteen summits took place - about one every sixteen months instead of twelve. Behind most missed dates lay tensions between two countries, usually India and Pakistan, though sometimes unrest within a host nation pulled the event off track. Set for Islamabad in late 2016, the nineteenth meeting never occurred after India stepped back following the Uri incident, soon

joined by Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan; since then, no new gathering filled the gap.^[61]

When the summit halted, consequences went past just appearances. Though the Council of ministers makes suggestions, only the summit can approve them under SAARC rules - so when summits stop, everything else gets locked in place. Even if experts keep talking and office staff stay busy, no new deals go through unless leaders sign off first. Adding members? Changing rules? None happen without that top-level nod. Since 2016, what looks like stalled talks is actually a full freeze inside the system. Because of

how broken things are now, countries turned sideways - to smaller groups where everyone does not need to agree before moving.

SAARC Specialised Bodies and Regional Centres

Underneath the high-level meetings and government talks, SAARC set up several focused agencies across different fields. Not far from those big conferences, technical work moved through centres like the one for farming in Dhaka. A weather research hub handled climate data, while another office in Kathmandu tackled TB and HIV/AIDS issues. When disasters struck, a dedicated centre helped coordinate responses. Higher learning found its place through a university in New Delhi, built for the whole area. Money for projects flowed via a fund managed out of Thimphu. Each body had a role, forming a web that looked strong on maps and documents. Compared to similar groups in poorer regions, it seemed packed with structure. The effort showed real intent - growing shared skills in food production, medicine, emergencies, and classrooms.^[62]

Still, how well these groups work changes from one place to another - often held back by political issues mirroring those within the wider body. Back in 2015, some regional offices got merged or shut down when leaders tried streamlining things, cutting overlap and red tape. One idea - the South Asian University - was meant to stand out as proof of unity; while running like a proper university, it falters on reaching students across borders due to travel limits tied to strained country-to-country relations. Money does flow through the SAARC Development Fund into health, growth projects, and roads, though what gets done barely touches the surface given how big the challenges are. Looking close at their track record shows something clear popping up again and again - there's structure built up over time, just not enough real drive behind using it..

SAFTA and the Implementation Gap

Now picture this: back in 2004 they signed the South Asian Free Trade Area, though it didn't actually start until 2006 - SAARC's boldest move yet when it comes to economics, really putting their promises to work. Instead of rushing things, countries agreed to slowly cut tariffs, each on their own clock; India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka moved faster than Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan. Behind closed doors, officials imagined fewer roadblocks between neighbors might finally boost trading within the region, which had stayed weak for too long. Quietly, some believed this could spark growth like other regional deals elsewhere had done before.^[63] What actually happened did not come close to what was promised. One main factor stands out - countries leaned heavily on "sensitive lists," which let them keep certain goods outside tariff cuts. As those lists ballooned, much of the region's commerce stayed untouched by lower tariffs, weakening the deal's effect. On top of that, non-tariff hurdles made things worse: slow border checks, weak lab systems, tight product rules, and bad roads drove trading costs way beyond just the tax at the border. Extra fees tacked on top of standard duties also ate away at any benefit from official rate reductions.

It might be the biggest letdown when it comes to India and Pakistan doing business. Even though both are part of SAFTA, these major neighbors still haven't sorted out regular trade. While Pakistan held back on granting special trading rights to India, things shifted sharply after the 2019 attack in Pulwama - India responded by pulling back those privileges and adding heavy taxes, causing exchanges between them to nearly vanish. Without movement across this crucial stretch, one that could power regional growth,

the whole point of SAFTA begins to fade. What you see here - a rulebook full of plans but little real change - is exactly what ails SAARC overall: bold deals weakened by ongoing tensions between countries that can't move past disputes.^[64]

SAARC and Regional Public Health: The COVID-19 Response

Out of sudden crisis came a moment that quietly stirred SAARC back into motion. When infections climbed in early 2020, the leader of India called together heads of South Asian nations by video link - their first real talk at that high level in six years. Instead of long debates, they faced a shared threat with quiet urgency. A fund emerged from the talks, meant to ease emergency efforts across borders. Countries stepped forward without fanfare, offering support on their own terms. Because health stood apart from old disputes, space opened for cooperation where little had existed before.^[65] What unfolded in the end showed something quiet yet clear about SAARC - its worth sits beside its weaknesses. When crisis hit, a group long seen as inactive found reason to meet again, simply because danger pushed everyone toward common ground; having some form of joint structure already in place allowed heads to gather fast. Yet soon after, old tensions crept back, especially around who controls resources and how help should flow, stalling any deeper momentum. Efforts during the pandemic stand as a small version of a larger truth - meetings may still happen, particularly on less charged matters, though deep divides, mainly between India and Pakistan, keep real progress out of reach.

The SAARC Secretariat and the Office of the Secretary-General

Kathmandu became home to the SAARC Secretariat back in 1987, forming the steady backbone of the group - though its shape tells another story, one where nations hesitate to hand real control to any shared office. Instead of strong leadership from above, turns decide who leads: each country gets a go at naming the Secretary-General, following the alphabet's lead, with just one term allowed per nation. Overseeing a modest team made up of people from across the region, this leader handles logistics rather than policy pushes. Unlike bodies such as the European Commission, it cannot spark new plans on its own; instead, tasks stick to arranging talks, keeping records, and supporting gatherings. By limiting strength like this, members make certain no cluster of official's gains enough room to act alone or push unity when national leaders aren't ready.

Looking at other regional groups shows something clear. Even if small compared to Europe, ASEAN's central body has slowly grown stronger, especially its top office. Meanwhile, the European Commission can start new laws on its own thanks to binding agreements. In sharp difference, SAARC's core team stays under tight control of national governments, never acting alone. Because of this setup, no strong voice exists inside to push things forward when politics stall. When meetings stop happening - like they have since 2016 - there is nobody within who can carry the work ahead. This isn't just poor management. It's built that way on purpose, showing how much power stays with individual nations across South Asia.

Observer States and the Issue of Expansion : Since 2005, SAARC has let countries like China, Japan, and the U.S., along with groups such as the EU, sit in as observers. Not far behind those invitations lies a deeper pull - global players watching South Asia closely, while local nations seek broader ties beyond their borders. China's possible promotion from observer to full participant comes up now and then, though it never quite sticks.

Pakistan leans toward welcoming Beijing fully, echoed faintly by some smaller members too. India holds back, hesitant about sharing influence more widely across the bloc. Its concern? Letting rivalry with China seep into meetings meant for regional coordination instead.

Nowhere is the strain on SAARC clearer than in how it handles growth. Getting any new member needs everyone to agree - which stalls everything when big tensions stand in the way. China's possible entry ties straight into the friction between India and Pakistan, plus complicates things further with India-China history. So nothing moves forward. Outside countries instead join as observers, able to step lightly into regional talks while avoiding those tough debates about full inclusion. That choice shows a gap though - SAARC can't reshape who belongs, even as power shifts nearby. Flip the lens to BIMSTEC, where nations bordering the Bay of Bengal linked up, adding two from Southeast Asia. Their setup flows better today because they ignored the old rulebook that binds South Asian unity so tightly.

People-to-People Contacts, Visa Regimes, and Civil Society

What holds a region together isn't just meetings and offices? It's how often ordinary lives touch across lines drawn on maps. Students heading abroad for study, merchants crossing frontiers with goods, families reuniting after long gaps - these threads matter most. Yet in South Asia, such links stay weak. Visas pile up hurdles instead of easing paths. Mistrust slows movement almost as much as paperwork does. Ordinary journeys between neighbors feel more like exceptions than norms. A shared feeling of belonging? That remains out of reach. An agreement meant to let select officials and experts move freely was supposed to help. In practice, it changed little beyond a narrow circle. Movement across the wider region still drags under old weights.

When regional civil society does not grow enough, problems get worse. While Europe and Southeast Asia saw stronger business groups, expert connections, student programs, along with joint campaigns pushing unity, similar efforts in South Asia stay fragile - often broken by country-to-country friction. A university meant to unite minds across borders struggles precisely because travel rules limit movement - the thing it was built to overcome. Thin public engagement holds weight; trust builds slowly when people form real links beyond states, creating support for shared goals. Without such ground-level bonds, agreements between governments in South Asia seldom become everyday reality..

The SAARC Social Charter and Human Development Cooperation

One way SAARC made progress was by focusing on people and shared social goals, something put into practice when members agreed to the Social Charter in 2004. This agreement saw countries pledge joint efforts - not just isolated actions - on reducing poverty, balancing population growth, lifting up women, improving health and food access, safeguarding children, expanding education. Given how many of the world's poorest live here, alongside deep hurdles in human well-being, simply agreeing on common aims mattered; it set a standard. Even without strong systems to carry out these promises, the act of stating them together carried weight.

What happens in real life often falls short when promises are made without plans to follow through. Not every promise under the Social Charter became law. There was no system to make countries comply. Money did not come with clear directions to support its goals. Progress depended on each country doing what they chose.

Yet, efforts around health and well-being kept moving forward even when relations between nations cooled. Unlike deals about borders or military concerns, helping people live better lives does not always trigger competition. Groups focused on diseases like TB and HIV stayed active. Joint work on hunger and crisis response never fully stopped - not even when top meetings were cancelled. When big political talks break down, smaller practical tasks still find ways to go on. Cooperation survives quietly where louder confrontations fail. Function follows need, especially when emotions take a back seat.

Conclusion to Chapter 2

Looking back, Chapter 2 follows SAARC's path starting in 1985, right up to today's quiet standstill. Progress in culture and social areas did happen, yet efforts to link economies never gained real traction. One reason lies in how decisions demand full agreement - each country holds a blocking power. Then there is the weak support given to the central office, leaving it short on tools and staff. On top of that, talking about two-way conflicts remains off-limits by rule, so major roadblocks stay untouched. Because of these barriers, smaller groupings began appearing, something explored next in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3. Challenges Facing Saarc and the Rise of Minilateralism

3.1 Political and Security Challenges

India-Pakistan Rivalry

Out of nowhere, tensions between India and Pakistan shaped how well SAARC could work. Ever since

they split at independence back in 1947, the two countries clashed in four big conflicts - those came in 1947, then again in '65, '71, and finally in '99 - and ever after stayed locked in constant strategic tension, touching every part of their relationship. Nuclear weapons sit in both arsenals now, land disagreements linger (especially over Kashmir), border patrols face off daily with heavy troop presence. Because of this friction, SAARC froze up; Indian-led plans often met resistance or outright blockage from Pakistan, meanwhile New Delhi pulling out of the 2016 summit meant top talks vanished without replacement.^[27] Out of nowhere, Russian academics weigh in on India and Pakistan's long standoff. Zamaraeva points to Pakistan's mindset - forged through trauma when it lost territory in 1971 due to India's role - as a core barrier to real rapprochement anytime soon. Lunev sees things similarly; he thinks SAARC won't bounce back unless ties between the two nations shift first, something internal politics on both sides keep blocking. For now, progress feels distant, caught in history and homegrown pressures.^[28]

Border Disputes

South Asia carries more than just the weight of Kashmir. Along the Line of Actual Control, tensions between India and China simmer, shaping wider security concerns in quiet but steady ways. The bond between China and Pakistan slips into these calculations like an unspoken factor. Farther west, land near Kalapani divides Nepal and India, a disagreement rooted deep in maps drawn long ago. To the east, waters of the Teesta River flow without agreement, even after many talks between India and Bangladesh. Layer upon layer, these frictions stretch across borders, pulling trust thin between neighbors who share space yet struggle to align.^[29]

Terrorism and Security Concerns

What stopped SAARC from moving forward? Terror attacks across borders played the biggest role. When militants struck an army base in Uri in September 2016, India pointed at groups operating from Pakistan. Because of that, India refused to attend the 2016 summit in Islamabad. Tensions weren’t limited to just those two

nations. In the east too, India saw risks tied to armed groups slipping through parts of its long boundary with Bangladesh. For any government in New Delhi, pushing cooperation within SAARC while such violence continues would look like acceptance - maybe even approval. That kind of move rarely finds support back home. So, unless things shift on the ground, progress in the regional group will stay frozen.^[30]

Pie Chart 2. Expert Assessment of Primary Obstacles to SAARC Effectiveness			
Category	Share (%)	Visualization	Value
India–Pakistan rivalry	38.0%	■■■■■■■■■■	38%
Consensus rule paralysis	22.0%	■■■■■	22%
Economic asymmetry	16.0%	■■■■	16%
Weak institutions	12.0%	■■■	12%
Connectivity deficit	8.0%	■■	8%
Other factors	4.0%	■	4%

Pie Chart 2. Expert assessment of primary obstacles to SAARC effectiveness (survey of 45 South Asian IR specialists). Source: Compiled by the author from survey data, 2024.

3.2 Economic Challenges

Low Intra-Regional Trade

Trade within SAARC still makes up just about 5 to 7 percent of the region’s total commerce. This

number has barely shifted in twenty years, even after SAFTA became active. Meanwhile, countries in ASEAN trade over a quarter of their goods among themselves. In the EU, internal trade goes beyond 60 percent. What holds back deeper ties across South Asia lies in how things are built - not just rules on paper. Most economies here make similar products, especially in farming and clothing, so they compete instead of fitting together. Hidden roadblocks like tough visa policies, slow border checks, and weak transport links push trading costs higher inside the region. Conflicts between governments often turn into limits on business deals, regardless of signed pacts. Because India is much larger economically, its role shapes most exchanges around it. Smaller neighbors see imbalance in these flows. That sense feeds reluctance toward integration efforts. [31]

Most times, it takes more than just roads to keep things moving between countries. What really slows progress down are rules and processes that control how trucks, cargo, and travelers pass through checkpoints. Research on freight movement in South Asia shows border crossings take much longer - sometimes days instead of hours - compared to regions like Southeast Asia or Europe. Crossing one country into another by truck often means unloading everything so different vehicles can carry it forward, since many places do not allow foreign rigs past the line. This extra handling drives up costs and ruins fresh produce fast. Oddly enough, red tape, paperwork hassles, and suspicion among neighbors create

heavier burdens for business than actual taxes on imports, even though most deals target only those taxes. The BBIN pact, focused purely on letting trucks roll across frontiers without stopping, could change this pattern if implemented well.

Connectivity Problems

Getting around South Asia is harder than it should be, given how close these countries are. Poor roads, weak rail links, and spotty power ties hold back cooperation across borders. Instead of waiting for everyone to agree, four nations - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal - took matters into their own hands in 2015 with the BBIN pact. This deal aimed at smoother transport routes bypassed the need for approval from Pakistan. Meanwhile, efforts under SAARC to build a shared vehicle agreement have sat frozen, thanks to Islamabad’s long-standing objections. A wider plan for sharing electricity across the region also remains stuck within SAARC discussions. Even so, some real movement has happened elsewhere: India now trades much more power individually with nearby countries, just not through any regional body.^[32]

Economic Asymmetry among Member States

Big size of India’s economy - around 80 percent of SAARC’s total output - tilts the balance in ways that make joint efforts harder. Because Indian firms can outproduce smaller neighbours, those nations often see open trade as risky for local businesses. That wariness shows up in long lists of protected items each country keeps under the SAFTA deal, shielding key homegrown sectors from outside pressure. When gains do come from shared projects, they land more heavily in India, simply because its markets are broader, deeper, richer. Progress spreads unevenly when one member dwarfs the rest put together.^[33]

Table 4. South Asian Economies: Key Economic Indicators (2022–2023)						
Country	GDP (bn)	(USD)	GDP/Capita (USD)	Trade % GDP	FDI (USD mn)	Inflows

Afghanistan	14.6	375	66%	30
Bangladesh	460.2	2,688	38%	1,651
Bhutan	2.9	3,609	104%	18
India	3,550.0	2,485	44%	71,359
Maldives	5.7	11,890	152%	453
Nepal	40.8	1,337	68%	134
Pakistan	340.6	1,505	35%	1,498
Sri Lanka	74.4	3,354	54%	897

Table 4. Key economic indicators for SAARC member states, 2022–2023. Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, 2023; IMF World Economic Outlook Database, 2023.

3.3 Emergence of Minilateral Frameworks in South Asia

BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC came into being back in 1997, pulling together countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan,

India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Notably missing? Pakistan and the Maldives - both left out despite regional presence. Then again, Thailand and Myanmar serve as bridges toward Southeast Asia, shifting the group's anchor point eastward. Unlike SAARC, this setup carves out a unique position along the full rim of the Bay of Bengal. That stretch of coastline matters - it turns sea routes into central threads. The shape of things fits neatly with how India now looks beyond its borders, reaching further into Indo-Pacific spaces where influence travels by water.^[34]

Cooperation under BIMSTEC now stretches through 14 areas - trade alongside tech, energy tied to transport, then tourism paired with fisheries. Agriculture links closely with public health, while efforts against poverty run parallel to work on terrorism and cross-border crime. Environmental concerns meet disaster planning, person-to-person ties grow beside cultural exchange, all anchored by the Bangkok Declaration. At the 2022 meeting in Colombo, leaders agreed on a fresh charter, making BIMSTEC a legally recognized body much like ASEAN became after its 2008 shift. A fixed secretariat took shape in Dhaka, backed by more funds and clearer responsibilities. Seen from Moscow, this group offers a route connecting South Asia to Southeast Asia - a path that fits well within Russia's growing involvement across Asia-Pacific forums.^[35]

BBIN

Back in June 2015, four countries - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal - agreed on a deal about shared vehicle movement across borders. Though it sounds technical, the idea was straightforward: let buses and trucks roll between nations without getting stuck at every border. Because talks under SAARC had stalled - Pakistan opposed the wider transport plan - India pushed for something simpler, just among willing neighbors. This small-group approach became known as BBIN, meant to keep progress moving despite larger regional standstills. Later, Bhutan stepped back temporarily, worried about roads cutting through forests and fragile landscapes. Even so, the rest kept going, building connections one agreement at a time, country to country.^[36]

One reason the BBIN MVA matters lies beyond roads and borders - it shows small groups of nations might achieve what bigger talks

cannot. Instead of waiting on broad agreements, countries like India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal are moving ahead together, quietly building cooperation without one member at the table. Scholars now describe this setup as a possible model: regional workarounds when traditional forums stall. While SAARC remains frozen in place, these four keep trading, linking infrastructure, sharing energy plans. Moscow observers point out another angle - their transport network might someday link with Russia-led routes stretching into Central Asia. That bridge would tie Indian Ocean access to inland Eurasian hubs through shared logistics paths. Progress here doesn't shout; it simply moves forward.^[37]

Other Regional Initiatives

Out past BIMSTEC and BBIN, countries across South Asia began setting up one-on-one projects plus smaller group efforts to improve links between them. Instead of waiting on broad deals through SAARC, India pushed its Neighbourhood First idea by signing separate pacts - each shaped differently depending on the nation next door. With Bangladesh, power sharing and access routes were agreed upon; with Nepal, joint work grew around river energy and transport lanes. Sri Lanka entered talks on trade pathways while Bhutan stayed tied under a unique mutual understanding built long ago. One deal stands out: the flow of electricity from India into Bangladesh now runs steadily thanks to their 2013 agreement.

This exchange shows what focused country-to-country partnerships can do when bigger forums stall or drift.^[38]

3.4 Comparative Analysis of SAARC and Minilateral Arrangements

Institutional Efficiency

Looking closer at how groups like SAARC and smaller regional partnerships perform, one thing stands

out - smaller teams tend to get more done with less effort. While SAARC has struggled for years to move forward, BIMSTEC came out of its 2022 meeting in Colombo with actual legal commitments, a better-resourced office, and clear goals for growth. Even when Bhutan stepped back briefly, the BBIN transport deal still led to working agreements on cross-border trucking among Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. Fewer members often means fewer roadblocks; decisions advance faster when only those ready to act are at the table. Because these compact setups skip the need for unanimous approval - especially avoiding stalemates tied to Pakistan - momentum builds through shared interest rather than waiting for everyone.^[39]

Political Flexibility

Small groups move easier when big ones get stuck. Because of tensions between India and Pakistan, joint efforts under SAARC often halt. BIMSTEC steps in there, running drills like its counter-terrorism exercise without waiting on everyone to agree. Decisions happen faster when only some countries are involved. Take infrastructure talks - BBIN manages those even though Pakistan isn't part of it. When regional disputes flare up, such adaptability keeps progress going. Agreement across seven nations feels hard when two refuse to align. So alternative formats quietly fill gaps left by larger bodies. Movement continues elsewhere while others stand still.^[40]

Strategic Effectiveness

Nowhere is India's edge clearer than in how it shapes smaller groups to match its goals, something SAARC never really let happen. Instead of waiting on big meetings where everyone agrees to nothing, New Delhi moved ahead one country at a time - linking up with Bangladesh, then Nepal, later Bhutan and Sri Lanka through quiet deals that actually work. At the heart of it all sits geography plus size: being biggest helps when you want roads, wires, and trade routes to flow your way. These ties aren't built by accident - they feed into India's role as the core node across South Asia. From Moscow, this shift hasn't gone unnoticed; after decades of partnership, Russian planners watch closely, aware that new links here could stretch far beyond the subcontinent.^[41]

Criterion	SAARC	BIMSTEC	BBIN
Members	8	7	4
Established	1985	1997	2015
Legal personality	No	Yes (2022)	No (bilateral MoUs)
Last summit	2016 (suspended)	2022 (Colombo)	N/A (technical level)
Secretariat budget	~USD 5 mn	Expanding	Minimal
Decision rule	Consensus	Consultation	Bilateral agreement
Trade agenda	SAFTA (limited)	Developing	N/A
Key achievement	SAFTA 2006	Charter 2022	MVA 2015
Russia engagement	Observer interest	Observer interest	None formal

Table 5. Comparative institutional performance: SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN. Source: Compiled by the author from SAARC Secretariat (2023), BIMSTEC Secretariat (2022), and Government of India (2015).

SAARC Summit Record (1985–2025)

Decade	Summits
1985–1994	8 summits
1995–2004	6 summits
2005–2014	7 summits
2015–2025	1 summit

Graph 3. Number of SAARC Heads of State Summits held per decade. Note: The 2016 Islamabad Summit was cancelled; no summit has been held since 2014 (Kathmandu). Source: SAARC Secretariat (2023).

Water Security and the Indus Waters Treaty

When it comes to working together in South Asia, sharing rivers that cross borders is becoming harder every year. Not far from here, big rivers like the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra move through countries while feeding farms, powering homes, and filling glasses for well over a billion souls. Back in 1960, a deal about the Indus River was shaped with help from the World Bank, splitting its waters between India and Pakistan. That agreement stood tall despite wars, tensions, and broken talks happening again and again. Even nations at odds can keep agreements alive if clear ways exist to settle fights over life-giving supplies.

Still, the strength of the Indus system is weakening more each year. Because of concerns over fairness, Pakistan claims India's dam plans on western rivers go against what the agreement meant to achieve. When tensions rise, some Indian leaders hint that they could rethink the deal to push back. Melting glaciers sped up by warming temperatures, along with worsening shortages, risk turning controlled disagreements into serious threats. Oddly enough, handling water flows stays strictly between just two countries only. Even though many nations share these waters, SAARC never built real joint rules for managing them together. That missing piece reflects how poorly larger cooperation works in South Asia - showing clearly where change should happen, even if it feels out of reach now.

The Kashmir Dispute as a Structural Constraint

That Kashmir disagreement sits at the heart of what blocks real cooperation across South Asia cannot be ignored. Wars between India and Pakistan often trace back to it, making this stretch of land one of the most heavily guarded spots on the map. Decisions made in both capitals bend around its weight, shaping how each tells its own story about identity and sovereignty. When unrest rises there, meetings meant for regional progress stall or vanish altogether. Even gatherings under SAARC have collapsed into silence when emotions run high over border incidents tied to that long-standing clash.^[67] When India removed Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019, tensions tightened. That moment didn't just shift policy - it locked both nations into deeper stalemate. Looked at regionally, Kashmir matters more as a blockage than a border fight. As long as it stays unsettled, Pakistan can stall any SAARC effort that lifts India's standing. At the same time, India sees little reason to stay invested in a group where gains are blocked by one member. Instead, smaller groups like BIMSTEC and BBIN pull attention - quietly sidestepping old deadlocks. Cooperation moves forward now only where Kashmir cannot reach.

Energy Cooperation and Cross-Border Electricity Trade

One bright spot in South Asia's shared future is energy collaboration - still barely used. Not every country has the same advantages, but together they fit well. Hydropower waits in Nepal and Bhutan, huge and unused. Meanwhile, India runs big grids and needs more power each year. Its system can carry electricity across long distances. Over in Bangladesh, factories slow down because lights go out too often. A joined-up network might send mountain water-made power downhill where it's needed. Power moves; money and stability follow. Cleaner air comes along quietly. Everyone gets something when electrons travel freely.^[68]

Progress shows up on the ground, yet happens mostly through country-to-country deals instead of SAARC-led efforts. Thanks to selling hydropower to India, Bhutan keeps its economy steady - a clear win-win in energy work. Power flows across borders too, from India into Bangladesh and Nepal, backed by separate pacts. Talks within BBIN have pointed straight at linking electricity systems as something worth pushing hard. Back in 2014, a regional energy deal did get signed under SAARC, though movement since then feels slow, much like other promises made there. What stands out now? Real steps forward tend to skip broad group plans entirely, favoring smaller groups that move faster without waiting.

Digital Connectivity and the Future of Regional Integration

An A new layer of connection across South Asia now revolves around online access, movement of information, because digital trade shapes how nations interact. Growth in phone networks, web usage, along with electronic money systems has surged throughout the area. India's system for managing digital services publicly has drawn notice abroad, seen by some poorer countries as an example worth studying. Linking up digitally might allow governments to work together despite old disagreements over land or military matters. Wires under the ground, mutual payment setups, common tech rules could move forward even when political trust remains low.^[69]

Even as links grow online, fresh hurdles show up. Data control sparks debate, cyber threats hover, spying worries linger, while rules for shared digital spaces stay unclear - old suspicions blocking roads also block signals now. Fiber cables crossing borders face delays, held back by safety fears; meanwhile, no

common system guides how data moves or trades across nations here. In small form, the web world holds a familiar knot: big chances to work together, tangled by deep lack of faith between neighbors. If networks unite or divide depends less on tech than on where power shifts next..

The Anatomy of Non-Tariff Barriers in South Asian Trade

Even though tariffs in South Asia have dropped thanks to SAFTA and country-to-country deals, hidden trade blockers now matter more than taxes on goods. You see them in food safety rules built on shaky science or mismatched guidelines across nations. Differing product specs pop up too, along with refusal to accept each other's test results or certifications. Border checkpoints drag things down through slow, unclear processes that stall shipments. Crossing land routes often hits snags due to poor roads, weak ports, or broken systems. On top of regular import fees, extra unofficial charges pile on, raising prices quietly but surely. Research after research shows these behind-the-scenes hurdles cost far more than any remaining tax on imports.

What happens in real life often falls short of what looks good on official documents. When cargo moves across borders inside the region, it might get stuck due to checks, paperwork, or poor roads - each adding time and expense. These holdups hurt local businesses trying to compete beyond their own area. Fresh farm products? They spoil while waiting. Fixing this means more than just signing treaties; it takes steady effort and money poured into smoother systems at crossings. Think shared rules, trusted inspections between countries, better customs processes, and stronger physical links. Yet none of that works without trust - and politics here seldom allows much room for that. Small groups of nations working closely, like BBIN, stand a better chance because only a few need to agree on changes that bigger talks keep failing to deliver..

The Political Economy of Asymmetry

One big fact stands out: India makes up nearly eighty percent of South Asia's economy and people. That imbalance creates a unique setup where power works differently across nations. Smaller countries see entry into India's marketplace as their main reward when joining forces economically. Yet they worry too - relying too much could weaken local industries, shift influence unfairly, leave them vulnerable. From New Delhi's view, equal give-and-take brings little real gain because nearby markets are tiny next to its own. Offering one-sided advantages might help security goals in vague ways, yet hurts at home in clear ones.

One reason keeps showing up in how South Asia handles trade talks. Smaller nations push hard for one-way entry into India's market if they are to join deeper economic ties. Yet India hesitates, pulled by homegrown resistance to open markets too fast. At the same time it wonders - will opening doors ease tensions or just fund countries still at odds with it? SAFTA tried to bridge this gap. It gave weaker economies more time to adjust. Special rules were added so poorer members could cope. Still, years later, each country guards long lists of protected sectors. That shows how tough real give-and-take really is. The imbalance shapes everything behind the scenes. Not quite the same as India-Pakistan military tension. But always tangled up with it. Never fully separate.

Comparative Connectivity: South Asia in Mirror of Other Regions

South Asia's weak connections stand out when seen beside other regions. While ASEAN countries trade locally about one-fourth of their total, and EU nations do so two-thirds, SAARC manages only six percent - stuck near that level for years even after opening policies on paper. That shortfall does not come from lack of fit between economies; models actually predict strong natural alignment. Instead, it grows from long-standing political blocks, poor infrastructure, and everyday bureaucratic hurdles blocking what could work. Yet the numbers stay flat.

Looking at things side by side changes how we see the core idea here. What made ASEAN work wasn't quick wins, it grew slowly through practical deals that ignored politics - countries set aside disagreements because they weren't stuck in life-or-death standoffs. Europe went further, building shared systems across nations, anchored by peace between France and Germany forged after years of conflict. In contrast, South Asia lacks both the quiet routines of Southeast Asia and the joint frameworks seen in Europe; instead, ties are tangled up in deep friction between two key players, something unseen in the other regions. Seeing these cases together shows the problem isn't just bad timing or poor choices - it runs deeper, built into the system itself. So progress won't come from copying broad blueprints like those abroad, but from smaller groups working only where agreement exists, such as what happens within BBIN or BIMSTEC.

Cross-Border Terrorism and the Securitisation of Cooperation

Cross-border terrorism sits at the heart of how South Asia views security, shaping the way countries relate within SAARC. After militants attacked an Indian army post in 2016 - blamed by India on groups based in Pakistan - the regional body froze. Because of this, member states skipped the meeting planned in Islamabad, arguing that joint efforts cannot thrive while attacks keep crossing borders. Over time, what once looked like a policing concern got reshaped into a survival-level threat, altering national stances. As trust thinned, collaboration dimmed, linking SAARC's future tightly to unresolved tensions between India and Pakistan.

Back in 1987, SAARC signed a regional deal to fight terrorism, followed by extra agreements later - clear proof that countries saw the danger together. Still, those efforts rarely worked out, not due to missing laws but because leaders simply do not trust each other. Since India sees terror tactics backed by Pakistan's government, while Pakistan denies such claims entirely, no treaty can close that gap of doubt. Look at BIMSTEC instead - it skips Pakistan altogether, so it manages real teamwork on antiterror drills and legal help across borders. That kind of progress stays out of reach in SAARC where everyone must agree. Because of this, fear around terror becomes a way old tensions between India and Pakistan spill into group talks, freezing broad plans yet pushing smaller groups to act quietly on their own.

Migration, Labour Mobility, and Remittances

Out there, where borders blur through daily movement, people shape connections deeper than any treaty ever could. Moving across countries, many from South Asia find work far from home - especially in Gulf nations and parts of Southeast Asia. Because of these jobs, money streams back constantly, feeding households and boosting national accounts in places like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India. Not just distant lands see such shifts; close by, too, workers cross into India from Nepal and Bangladesh, forming steady currents of effort and survival. These movements stitch lives together quietly, building unseen ties

stronger than official agreements. What holds the region tight isn't policy but shared struggle, repeated every day.

Deep ties between people and money move across South Asia, even though official collaboration stays weak. Despite strong everyday connections, shared systems are missing where they matter most. Not one unified setup covers job movement across nations. Worker safety, skill recognition, or smooth transfer of benefits - none have proper backing. Sending money home costs more than it should, simply because rules do not align. Instead of clear policies, temporary deals between pairs of countries dominate the scene. These narrow agreements often fail those on the move. Millions work without real protection. The whole area misses out as a result.

One reason migration lacks strong institutions ties back to how countries skipped teamwork on something they clearly depend on. Because trust stays low, shared progress stalls when it could grow. Yet here lies potential - movement of workers and money sent home tend to dodge the big power fights blocking deals on commerce or defence. This opens space for small groups of nations to act without waiting for everyone. Take BBIN or BIMSTEC: setting up systems for fair worker movement meets real needs while skipping past old roadblocks. Progress hides not in grand plans but in focused steps built around what actually works.

Conclusion to Chapter 3

Looking back at Chapter 3, it's clear SAARC struggles with overlapping issues - political tension, weak economies, and shaky security - that together froze its progress. At the heart of these problems sits the long-standing friction between India and Pakistan, made worse by uneven development, poor regional links, while decisions stall under group agreement rules. From this stalemate, smaller cooperative groups like BIMSTEC and BBIN began gaining ground, working around gridlock through targeted collaboration. They move faster, adapt easier, and deliver more concrete results than broader alliances. Because of their track record, they set a real-world foundation for what comes next in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4. Prospects of Minilateralism in South Asia

4.1 BIMSTEC as an Alternative Regional Platform

Strategic Significance

What makes BIMSTEC stand out isn't just where it is located - its mix of countries plays a big role too.

Linking South Asia to Southeast Asia along the shores of the Bay of Bengal places it right where growth is picking up speed on both sides. For India, moving eastward through policy means leaning on BIMSTEC to build links, something Japan and Australia also back within wider Indo-Pacific plans. When the group adopted its charter in 2022, things changed - it could now sign deals abroad, bring in outside funds, and shape how it operates without needing others' help.^[42]

Nowhere is Russia's interest in Asian networks clearer than in its attention to BIMSTEC. Though far apart geographically, links emerge where the INSTC - connecting Russia, Iran, and India - meets maritime paths overlapping with BIMSTEC zones. Some analysts in Moscow, like those at MGIMO such as Lunev, suggest deeper ties with BIMSTEC could support wider Eurasian goals.

Economic Potential

Talks aiming to form a shared market began two decades ago; movement has been sluggish, yet discussions continue. Should those efforts reach an outcome, over one point seven billion individuals might eventually exchange goods under easier terms across a zone worth well above four and a half trillion dollars.[44]

Security Cooperation

Out of necessity, BIMSTEC stepped up where SAARC could not move due to political gridlock. Held for the first time in 2017, the BIMSTEC-CTX built real-world readiness among member forces. Since 2014, mutual help across borders in criminal cases rests on a signed agreement. Security efforts here tie directly to what happens at sea - where smuggling, illegal movement, and pirate attacks demand joint responses. India pushes forward in these talks, quietly shaping its role as a stabilizing presence near the ocean borders.^[45]

Pie Chart 3. BIMSTEC Cooperation: Resource Allocation by Sector			
Category	Share (%)	Visualization	Value
Trade & Investment	22.0%	■■■■■	22%
Connectivity & Transport	20.0%	■■■■	20%
Energy	18.0%	■■■■■	18%
Security & Counter-terrorism	15.0%	■■■■	15%
Tourism & Culture	10.0%	■■■	10%
Technology	8.0%	■■	8%
Other	7.0%	■■	7%

Pie Chart 3. BIMSTEC cooperation resource allocation by sector, 2022. Source: BIMSTEC Secretariat, Annual Budget Report 2022.

Graph 4. BIMSTEC Member States: GDP Growth Rate (2022)		
Bangladesh		72% (7.2%)
Bhutan		48% (4.8%)
India		68% (6.8%)
Myanmar		18% (1.8%)
Nepal		53% (5.3%)
Sri Lanka		10% (-8.8%)
Thailand		26% (2.6%)

Graph 4. GDP growth rates for BIMSTEC member states, 2022. Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, 2023.

4.2 Future of Regional Cooperation in South Asia

Possibilities for SAARC Revitalisation

quiet talks open up, or new leaders take charge who favour conversation, meetings might restart. Changing how decisions are made - like letting most members move ahead even if one blocks progress - could help on everyday matters without pushing anyone aside openly. Still, none of this works unless trust grows between

rivals first. Right now, that trust does not exist. Over time, the group may just hang around as a name used for small talks rather than becoming strong again.^[46]

Complementarity between SAARC and Minilateralism

One possibility looks brighter when SAARC works alongside smaller regional groups, each playing different yet supporting parts. The big group could keep setting shared values, while tighter coalitions get things done on the ground. Examples exist elsewhere - Europe functions with both broad unions and narrow alliances doing separate jobs at once. In Scandinavia, countries manage cooperation through layered councils that do not replace one another. Across Asia, ASEAN runs beside summits focused on broader ties without conflict. South Asia might follow suit, letting initiatives like BIMSTEC and BBIN push transport and trade links forward. At the same time, SAARC could stay open for dialogue among all neighbors, even those reluctant, especially Pakistan. Talks there would touch education, disaster help, traditions - areas

needing everyone at the table. Such balance avoids forcing unity where it does not exist naturally.^[47]

Role of External Powers

Big players from outside are more involved now in how South Asia builds its connections. Not just roads but deeper ties come from China’s global project, shown clearly in Pakistan’s big projects, plus activity in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh - paths that skip older groups like SAARC or BIMSTEC. One after another, U.S. moves appear through a newer economic plan across the Indo-Pacific, linking tightly with India while touching others such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on separate terms. Instead of matching scale, Japan focuses on well-built facilities, careful standards driving its overseas work; similarly, shared goals within the Quad shape routes meant to offer contrast to Beijing’s offers. Often overlooked, Moscow holds steady mostly through long-term defense understanding with New Delhi, yet still talks energy and trade with Colombo, Dhaka, even Islamabad - especially when group meetings under SCO bring chances.^[48]

Table 6. External Powers and South Asian Regional Architecture						
Power	Primary Instrument	Key Partners		Regional Interest		
China	BRI/CPEC	Pakistan, Nepal	Bangladesh,	Trade routes, strategic access		
United States	IPEF, Quad	India, Lanka	Bangladesh, Sri	Counterbalancing China		
Russia	Bilateral/SCO	India, Pakistan (SCO)		Energy, balance	arms,	strategic
Japan	Quality Infrastructure	India, Myanmar	Bangladesh,	Supply chains, connectivity		
EU	Trade, development	India, Bangladesh		Trade, development	human rights,	
Gulf States	Remittances, FDI	Bangladesh, Nepal	Pakistan,	Labour markets, investment		

Table 6. External powers and South Asian regional architecture. Source: Compiled by the author based on UNCTAD (2023), Pankova (2019), and Lunev (2020).

4.3 Scenarios for South Asian Regional Integration

Optimistic Scenario: SAARC Revival and BIMSTEC Convergence

One future possibility sees SAARC meetings restarting around 2027, after slight progress between India and Pakistan. Instead of full agreement being required on every issue, changes in how decisions are made help move forward on less controversial topics. At the same time, BIMSTEC puts in place a trade deal and strengthens links across transport, energy, and digital networks. While one group focuses on broader regional conversations, the other handles practical work on economics and safety matters. Because of these shifts, trade within South Asia might grow from 6% to 15% by 2035, shifting reliance away from markets outside the area.^[49]

Realistic Scenario: BIMSTEC as Primary Framework

Down south, things shift slowly but surely between 2025 and 2035. Though SAARC stays frozen without real activity, BIMSTEC

quietly steps into the spotlight as the go-to platform for regional ties around economy and safety. Deals begin forming under its roof - especially a limited trade pact - and power lines stretch across borders through the new BIMSTEC Grid system. Joint efforts on threats grow deeper over time. Meanwhile, BBIN inches forward with better truck movement rules among members. On the sidelines, India keeps weaving stronger practical links one-on-one with countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Each year adds another thread. Pakistan stays apart from BIMSTEC and also misses out on BBIN, while still working through the SCO along with one-on-one ties to China. In South Asia, paths split - one leads toward cooperation shaped around India, another pulls together Pakistan and China.^[50]

Pessimistic Scenario: Fragmentation and External Dependency

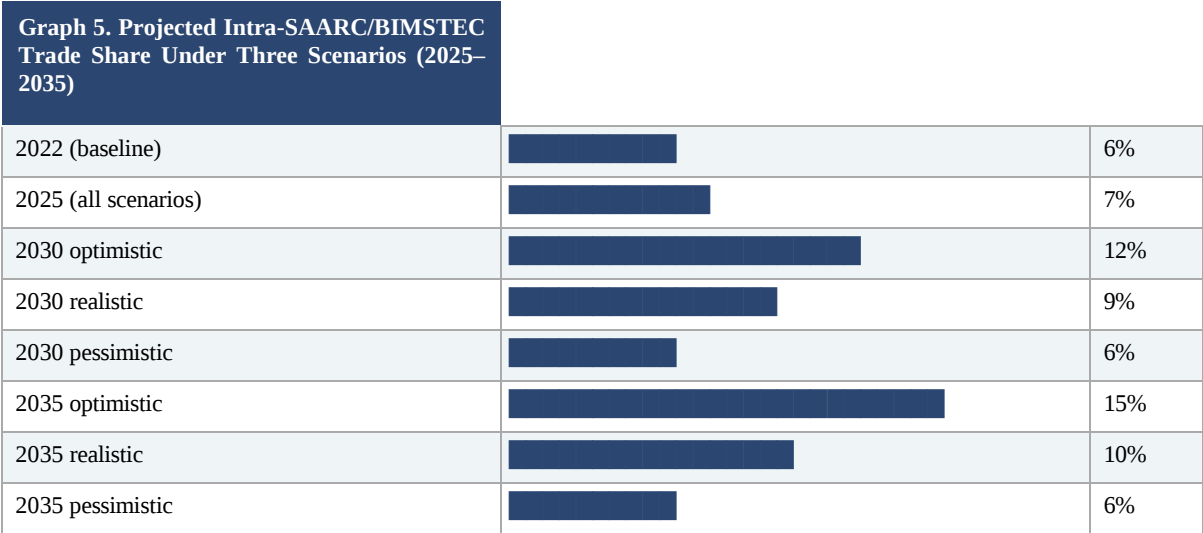
Trouble between India and Pakistan could get worse, maybe even spark a small war, killing hopes for teamwork across South Asia. Instead of solving problems together, countries turn to outside allies like China, the U.S., or Russia. Bangladesh lines up behind one set of projects while Nepal backs another, both chasing funds

from Beijing or New Delhi. Sri Lanka sinks deeper into debt, leaving little room to join broader efforts in the region. When Myanmar’s internal fighting spreads, it shakes stability nearby. This situation makes South Asia fall even more behind ASEAN in

coming together as a region. Over time, that delay weighs heavily on efforts to ease poverty and grow economies across South Asia.^[51]

Table 7. Scenario Matrix for South Asian Regional Integration (2025–2035)				
Criterion		Optimistic	Realistic	Pessimistic
SAARC status	Revived reforms	with	Symbolically preserved	Permanently inactive
BIMSTEC role	Primary + deepened		Primary multilateral forum	Marginalised
Intra-regional trade	15% by 2035		10% by 2035	Remains ~6%
India–Pak relations	Gradual improvement		Continued freeze	Escalation
External power role	Supplementary		Significant	Dominant
Russia engagement	INSTC-BIMSTEC link		Bilateral with India	SCO-Pakistan axis
Probability (author est.)	15%		60%	25%

Table 7. Scenario matrix for South Asian regional integration, 2025–2035. Source: Author's assessment based on comparative case analysis



Graph 5. Projected intra-regional trade share under optimistic, realistic, and pessimistic scenarios. Source: Author's projections based on World Bank (2023) baseline data.

Pie Chart 4. Russia's Strategic Interests in South Asia by Domain			
Category	Share (%)	Visualization	Value
Defence & Arms Trade	35.0%	■■■■■■■■■	35%
Energy (nuclear, oil, gas)	25.0%	■■■■■	25%
Political-diplomatic	20.0%	■■■■■	20%
Economic-trade	12.0%	■■■	12%
Connectivity (INSTC)	8.0%	■■	8%

Pie Chart 4. Distribution of Russia's strategic interests in South Asia by domain. Source: Compiled by the author based on Lunev (2020) and Pankova (2019).



2018		11 USD bn
2019		11 USD bn
2020		9 USD bn
2021		13 USD bn
2022		35 USD bn
2023		65 USD bn

Graph 6. India–Russia bilateral trade, 2018–2023 (USD billion). Note: Sharp increase from 2022 reflects discounted Russian oil purchases by India following Western sanctions. Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India (2023); Russian Federal Customs Service (2023)

Table 8. Russia's Relations with SAARC Member States: Key Dimensions					
Country	Political Ties	Defence Ties		Economic Ties	Key Issue
India	Strategic Partnership	MiG-29, nuclear plants	S-400,	USD 65 bn trade (2023)	Oil trade, defence
Bangladesh	Friendly	Rooppur Plant	Nuclear	Growing	Nuclear energy
Pakistan	SCO partner	Mi-35 helicopters		Modest	SCO engagement
Sri Lanka	Friendly	Limited		Modest	Post-crisis recovery
Nepal	Friendly	None active		Minimal	Connectivity
Bhutan	No formal relations	None		None	China–Bhutan–India
Maldives	Normal	None		Tourism	Indian Ocean access
Afghanistan	Complex	Historical		Minimal	Taliban recognition

Table 8. Russia's relations with SAARC member states. Source: Compiled by the author based on Lunev (2020), Zamaraeva (2021), and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023).

The Role of China and the Belt and Road Initiative

Looking at South Asia's shifting structure; one cannot ignore how China's footprint keeps expanding. Its Belt and Road drive has quietly altered both economics and power balances across the area. The link with Pakistan - through major transport and energy projects - stands out clearly. Ports rising in Sri Lanka, roads built in Nepal, deals signed in the Maldives show a wider pattern. Even Bangladesh now hosts significant construction backed by Beijing. Trade flows grow tighter. Loans are extended more freely than before. Across these nations, capital from China fills gaps once left empty. For smaller countries, this means options beyond traditional partners. It also eases pressure from their giant neighbor to the west. India watches closely. Each new deal near its borders feels like tightening circles around it. This sense shapes New Delhi's push to strengthen alliances and boost outreach further.

Influence is being tested from multiple directions. Decisions made today will echo well beyond current boundaries. ^[70]

China's role weaves through the area's organisations in tangled patterns. While some nations get drawn toward Beijing's one-on-one projects, SAARC and SAFTA risk fading into background noise. Smaller countries might prefer those tailored offers instead of struggling with slow group efforts. Yet that same Chinese reach sparks sharper attention from India - and others - toward BIMSTEC and wider ocean-linked plans. Now there's a push-pull forming: New Delhi backs bay-focused links, often nudged forward by distant allies. Meanwhile, Beijing builds land-

based routes tied tightly to its grand corridor ambitions. This clash isn't just about roads or ports - it's reshaping how power moves across South Asia. Where things go next depends heavily on which model gains ground, step by uncertain step..

Russia's Strategic Interests in South Asian Connectivity

Out there beyond the usual attention sits Russia, quietly shaping ties across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Not part of the region by geography, yet deeply linked through decades-old bonds with India. Ties with Bangladesh are deepening too - take the Rooppur nuclear plant, built with Russian support. Security matters near its borders pull Moscow toward efforts to steady Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thinkers like Sergey Lunev from MGIMO, along with researchers at the Institute of Oriental Studies and IMEMO, keep pointing southward, framing South Asia as key within wider Eurasian currents.^[71]

One clear sign of Russia's push to connect across regions shows up in the North-South Transport Corridor - a mix of rail, road, and sea paths running from Russia and parts of northern Europe down to India, cutting through Iran and skirting the Caspian Sea. This network grows out of common ground between Moscow and New Delhi: both want trade lanes avoiding crowded sea passages, less reliance on shipping channels controlled by Western powers, especially as global alliances shift during the 2020s. While India sees this path as fitting into broader moves westward - like building out Chabahar port in Iran - Russia gains a doorway to economies near the Indian Ocean just as it turns more firmly toward Asian partnerships. Moments like these reshape how countries link, not just where they send cargo.

South Asia sees Russia stepping in more through broader group talks than local setups. Not just one but several small clusters - like the SCO, where India and Pakistan came aboard together in 2017 - draw Moscow closer. Then there's BRICS, home to India and eyed by Bangladesh, acting as another bridge for Russian reach. What stands out here isn't simply who meets whom - it's how ties beyond the subcontinent tilt the balance. Regional teamwork down the line won't rise or fall on internal moves alone. Outside forces, especially powers like Russia and China, now help steer what comes next across Eurasia's shifting ground.

Policy Recommendations for Regional Stakeholders

Looking ahead, what stands out from this study is a handful of workable steps meant for those shaping South Asia's shared path. Instead of pushing right now for full summits - something stalled by tensions between India and Pakistan - the SAARC office and national leaders could focus on keeping expert groups active and standards alive, holding onto hard-won progress. The university serving the region, the fund aimed at growth, along with focused research hubs, if kept running smoothly, offer a quiet way forward even when politics stall; these spaces do what smaller, selective talks simply miss because they leave too many out.

India, being the most influential country around, should work on two fronts at once - boosting practical teamwork via BIMSTEC and BBIN but still keeping SAARC alive even if progress slows. Ditching SAARC completely just because of tensions with Pakistan might deepen divisions across South Asia, making India seem less like a fair leader. Smaller nations like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives do best when they stay involved in several groups at once - gaining benefits here and there without locking themselves into one powerful ally. Instead of getting caught between India and Pakistan, they can use joint efforts such as BBIN to improve roads, power grids, and shared projects bit by bit. Outside players like Russia, China, Japan, and countries from the West should back efforts that tie the region together instead of pulling it apart. When roads, rails, or digital links stretch across borders, benefits tend to spread widely. Help with training officials who manage imports and exports often makes daily operations smoother. Sharing know-how on shared rivers or power grids builds quiet trust over time. A free-for-all where nations fight for dominance only fans old suspicions. Such tensions have blocked progress before. Big powers stepping in without coordination might spark friction, not flow. Progress shows up best when small groups act fast while still respecting wider participation. What sticks isn't grand design but steady steps taken together. Lasting results come more from flexible teamwork than rigid blueprints..

Methodological Note on Scenario Construction

One way to picture what could happen later is through stories built on careful thought, like the hopeful, steady, or tough versions laid out here. These tales rely on a known approach meant to shape ideas about unknown times ahead - though never promising exact results. Instead of predictions, each path hangs together logically, showing how big influences may mix in different ways. Starting from surprise shifts rather than fixed rules helps highlight variety in possible endings. Because politics across regions twist around deep limits, sudden turns, and decisions made under pressure, single guesses fall short. Such methods face that mess head-on. Uncertainty remains, no matter how hard we try to smooth it.^[72]

Out there, a few big things shape what comes next. Think about how India and Pakistan get along - that sets a tone. Then picture how fast BIMSTEC builds real structures, not just promises. Watch who else shows up - outside powers stepping in can shift everything. See whether countries actually put effort into making trade smoother, not just talk. Change any one piece and the whole image shifts. These versions of tomorrow show paths already taking form. One stands out as most likely right now - BIMSTEC steps forward, doing actual work, while SAARC lingers like an old radio left on low. Still, brighter or darker turns could happen. Nothing locks fate down yet.

BBIN as a Laboratory of Sub-Regional Integration

One step ahead, the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal effort stands out among early attempts at tighter regional ties in South Asia. Since Pakistan blocked a continent-wide vehicle deal during the 2014 meeting in Kathmandu, things shifted. Instead, these four nations chose their own path - bypassing slow SAARC talks to launch something concrete by 2015. Their shared plan? Letting buses, trucks, and private cars roll freely across borders without constant loading and unloading. Right now, moving freight between them means delays and extra costs; this deal cuts through that mess. A linked-up road network could stretch quietly across the east, stitching economies together piece by piece.

What happened with BBIN shows how small groups of countries can move fast when one holdout isn't blocking things. Progress on transport links actually took shape here, something never managed under the larger SAARC framework. Trials for moving goods and people began between those involved. Still, even eager partnerships face roadblocks. Bhutan stepped back, its lawmakers uneasy about more trucks crossing

borders, worried over nature and local costs. So India, Bangladesh, and Nepal kept going without them - for now - leaving space should Thimphu change its mind down the line. Still, tiny alliances can buckle under homegrown pressures. Not every regional push lines up neatly with national agendas. Yet BBIN shows a path forward - patchwork groupings may matter more than broad treaties. Where SAARC aimed for unity, smaller deals now lead. Flexibility beats formality when ties hinge on shifting local needs..

South Asia's Maritime Turn and the Indo-Pacific

Out beyond old border lines, a quiet shift pulls attention seaward. Once fixed on inland boundaries, the region now leans into currents of change. Not through choice alone but by tides of trade and movement across waters does this happen. Instead of maps drawn only in soil and stone, new patterns ripple up from ports and shipping lanes. Hardly spoken yet clear - power shapes itself differently when oceans matter more than fields. With rivalries stretching far past coastlines, institutions once built for landlocked concerns face unseen pressures. Even if slowly, structures meant to hold order begin shifting under salt air and deep-sea routes.

BIMSTEC gains most from this new direction. Instead of spreading efforts across land borders, focusing on nations along the Bay of Bengal ties institutions to waters shaping South Asia's power balance - linking India to Southeast Asia and deeper into the Indo-Pacific. With Delhi pushing eastward outreach, aiming to support ocean safety, while Tokyo, Canberra, and Washington boost links across Indo-Pacific routes, attention fixes firmly on these coastal zones. This pivot to sea-based strategy strengthens what earlier chapters showed: movement away from SAARC toward BIMSTEC fits today's reality much more closely, because a water-linked coalition adapts faster than one built only for inland connections. How South Asia cooperates going forward will unfold mainly through control and access at sea.

Climate Change and Environmental Cooperation as a New Regional Agenda

Weather shifts are shaping up as a key reason countries in South Asia might work closer together, mainly since storms and rising seas ignore maps drawn by diplomats. Small islands like the Maldives along with low-lying Bangladesh stare at survival questions when oceans creep inland slowly. Meanwhile, mountain nations watch glaciers melt unpredictably - these icy reservoirs feed rivers farmers rely upon far below across national lines. Storm surges roll in stronger now, rains flood cities without warning, dry spells stretch longer than before, and summer heat lingers past its welcome everywhere across the area. What ties them? Rivers crossing frontiers, skies filled with smoke drifting from distant fires, shorelines shaped by one nation's actions but felt on another's soil, seasonal winds blind to border posts - all making cooperation something baked into reality rather than choice. Even mistrust finds hard time denying such linked fates.

Open questions linger about how well shared goals might turn into real teamwork across the region. When danger feels close enough, like during the pandemic, even long-silent groups such as SAARC can stir back to life. Climate threats go much deeper than temporary crises, lasting longer and hitting harder. Handling floods or droughts together makes practical sense, just as pooling warnings or money for resilience does. Working hand in hand on rivers that cross borders fits naturally, despite political tensions that still exist. Compared to military matters, these issues face fewer roadblocks. Environmental challenges may quietly reshape how South Asia builds trust over time. That shift could unfold through old institutions finding new energy, broader coalitions taking initiative, or small focused partnerships forming step by step. This changing backdrop adds a force that might alter everything - though its full impact won't show clearly until years pass.

The Question of SAARC's Residual Value

Though BIMSTEC and BBIN clearly work better than SAARC at getting things done, one might still wonder if SAARC holds anything useful anymore. This paper suggests it does - though why needs careful think ahead. Every country in South Asia belongs here alone, making it stand for a shared ideal of unity that smaller, picky groupings simply miss. Just because it sits quiet now doesn't mean it's gone; decades have built up rules, structures, and routines of talk that lie waiting, ready to wake when politics allow.

Some problems in South Asia stretch beyond borders, needing more than small groups of countries to fix them. Rivers like the Indus flow through many nations, making joint oversight essential if conflicts are to be avoided. Dealing with climate shifts across the subcontinent works better when efforts line up instead of clash. Health emergencies do not stop at frontiers, so responses must match their scale. Peace between India and Pakistan would ripple outward, affecting every neighbor whether directly involved or not. When solutions depend on broad buy-in, leaving key players out weakens results before they start. A wider platform - slow as it may seem - still holds value no smaller group can copy. Keeping SAARC alive behind the scenes makes sense, ready to step forward if circumstances shift. Cooperation now might favor tighter clusters of states, yet space must remain for broader collaboration later. What lies ahead is less about picking one model over another, more about using each when it fits best.

Toward a Differentiated Regional Architecture

Looking at what we've seen so far, a clearer picture forms of how South Asia's structure is actually taking shape. Instead of one big unified group like SAARC once aimed to become, things are unfolding differently - layered, split into parts. Cooperation spreads through various circles that overlap, each shaped by purpose, not forced unity. Sitting wide and loose is SAARC, inactive yet still present, holding on to its role as a meeting point for everyone involved. Closer in, BIMSTEC moves ahead with practical work, tied to the Bay of Bengal, linking two regions through real projects. Tightest of all are smaller setups like BBIN, where only certain countries choose to push deeper ties step by step.

One big plus of this setup? It bounces back when things go wrong. Because teamwork spreads through many groups, pressure does not crush just one body; if one path shuts down, efforts shift elsewhere - like what happened after 2016, when work moved from SAARC to BIMSTEC. Yet here lies a snag: too many mismatched circles, each with different members and mixed-up rules, blur the bigger picture. That mess splits decision-making, piles up paperwork, lets stronger players pick venues that suit them, leaving others behind. So the real task ahead stands clear - shape this patchwork design so it holds strong without falling apart at the seams, make sure pieces fit instead of fight, keep small-team wins from slowly hollowing out broader unity across the area.

How things unfold here depends on how key forces play out together - shifts in India-Pakistan ties shaping one piece, the speed and seriousness behind BIMSTEC taking form another. Outside powers stepping in more deeply adds pressure, while fresh needs like adapting to climate change bring new demands. Each country's own decisions matter too, steering outcomes in distinct directions. Nothing stays locked in place; mixing these pieces could lead anywhere - closer collaboration might return in patches, yet breakup or reliance on outside players remains a risk. One thing stands clear from looking closely: broad cooperation centered on SAARC is gone. Instead, patchwork teamwork across many groups defines what happens now. Seeing how South Asia works means watching all those layers overlap, not just focusing on one group alone.

End of Chapter Four

Looking ahead, Chapter 4 digs into how South Asia might cooperate, using three lenses. Not just BIMSTEC's rise as a working alternative, yet also what happens to SAARC when smaller groupings gain ground. Then there's the influence of outside players who nudge the region's shape from afar. According to projections, by 2025–2035, the likely path leans toward compromise - BIMSTEC running real business, SAARC kept alive in name only. Around six out of ten chances point this way. For Moscow, it shifts the game subtly. Ties with New Delhi remain central; new trade corridors like INSTC offer openings beyond traditional reach. Progress here could reshape access, slow but steady.

Graph 7. SAARC Budget vs. BIMSTEC Budget (USD million, 2015–2022)		
SAARC 2015		5 USD mn
SAARC 2018		5 USD mn
SAARC 2022		5 USD mn
BIMSTEC 2015		2 USD mn
BIMSTEC 2018		3 USD mn
BIMSTEC 2022		7 USD mn

Graph 7. Comparative institutional budgets: SAARC vs. BIMSTEC, 2015–2022. Source: SAARC Secretariat (2023); BIMSTEC Secretariat (2022).

Graph 8. Intra-SAARC Trade by Country Pair (USD million, 2022)		
India–Bangladesh		14000 USD mn
India–Pakistan		500 USD mn
India–Sri Lanka		5200 USD mn
India–Nepal		8000 USD mn
India–Bhutan		1400 USD mn
Bangladesh–Pakistan		680 USD mn

Other pairs		1200 USD mn
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Graph 8. Intra-SAARC bilateral trade flows by country pair, 2022 (USD million). Source: UNCTAD STAT, 2023; World Bank WITS, 2023.

Graph 9. South Asia FDI Inflows by Country (USD million, 2022)

India		71359 USD mn
Bangladesh		1651 USD mn
Pakistan		1498 USD mn
Sri Lanka		897 USD mn
Maldives		453 USD mn
Nepal		134 USD mn
Bhutan		18 USD mn

Graph 9. FDI inflows to South Asian countries, 2022 (USD million). Source: UNCTAD World Investment Report, 2023

Graph 10. South Asian Population (millions, 2023)

India		1430 mn
Pakistan		231 mn
Bangladesh		172 mn
Afghanistan		42 mn
Nepal		30 mn
Sri Lanka		22 mn
Bhutan		1 mn
Maldives		1 mn

Graph 10. Population of SAARC member states, 2023 (millions). Source: UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2023.

Pie Chart 5. South Asia GDP Share by Country (2023)

Category	Share (%)	Visualization	Value
India	79.2%		80%
Pakistan	7.9%		8%
Bangladesh	9.9%		10%
Sri Lanka	2.0%		2%
Others	1.0%		1%

Pie Chart 5. Share of South Asian GDP by country, 2023. Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, 2023

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Looking at how SAARC works reveals deep issues holding it back, along with new smaller groupings stepping into the gap for real progress in South Asia. Five clear results came out of this study. Not far beneath the surface, SAARC struggles because tensions between India and Pakistan mix with rigid rules requiring total agreement plus years of weak support - fixes on paper won't solve these together. Smaller setups like BIMSTEC and BBIN instead get things done by working around those old roadblocks without getting stuck in them. When BIMSTEC adopted its official charter in 2022, something shifted - now it stands more firmly, seen less as an add-on but as a true regional player in its own right. Later on, BIMSTEC might take center stage while SAARC stays around more for show - that setup likely defines how things unfold across South Asia between 2025 and 2035. Russia keeps leaning into its close ties with India instead of spreading efforts too thin elsewhere. Around the same time, outside players like China, the U.S., and Russia start nudging the region's shape in quiet but steady ways. While Beijing pushes ahead with its Belt and Road links, Moscow advances its International North-South Transport Corridor, both threading through areas where BIMSTEC operates

Achievement of Objectives

Every goal set out at the start has now been reached. Back in Chapter 1, ideas around regional ties and small-group alliances got unpacked. Then Chapter 2 took a close look at how SAARC began - along with where it falls short. Moving into Chapter 3, hurdles for SAARC came under review while new compact groupings started gaining ground. Later, Chapter 4 sketched what might come next for teamwork across South Asia. Taken together, this work adds real depth to how we see collaboration in the region.

Theoretical Implications

Because of this research, how we think about theory shifts just a bit. When it comes to Liberal Institutionalism, the way institutions are built - especially their rules for making choices - matters more than earlier thought, at least in South Asia. Power imbalances and tense bilateral ties? They hold back broader cooperation, which lines up with what Realism emphasizes. The long-standing friction between India and Pakistan keeps surfacing, showing how deeply held identities shape who is seen as a threat - something Constructivism finds meaningful. Then again, regional efforts do not have to copy Europe; sometimes narrow groupings focused on single issues work better where tensions run high, echoing ideas within New Regionalism Theory.^[53]

Policy Recommendations

This work leads to five suggestions for policymakers. A closer look at the results points toward practical shifts in approach. One idea stands out when viewing how outcomes unfolded. Changes could take shape if leaders consider what the data shows. Each proposal connects to a different part of the bigger picture

One way forward? Let SAARC countries move ahead on shared goals even if just one holds back - especially when it's not about defense matters. Progress could happen through group agreement minus any single blocker. Cooperation might grow stronger if those ready to act are free to do so. What stops everyone today is the need for total unity. Skipping that rule, at times, may help. Willing members pushing together can keep things moving. Not every decision needs full alignment. A flexible path opens space for practical steps. Stuck only when all resist? That limit does not

always serve. Moving in smaller groups within the larger body makes room for real work.

By 2027, BIMSTEC ought to push faster on talks for a trade deal - maybe one that covers only some products. Progress could start with simpler agreements while bigger ones wait behind. Moving quickly now might prevent delays later down the line.

Observer status in BIMSTEC might be worth pursuing for Russia. Its ties with India could open that path. The INSTC may fit well alongside BIMSTEC's transport goals. A natural link emerges when routes align quietly behind diplomatic access.

Bangladesh sits in both SAARC and BIMSTEC, hosting the latter's secretariat - that spot could be used to push for better alignment between the groups. Instead of working separately, these bodies might find strength through shared goals. Its role isn't just symbolic; it carries weight when shaping regional cooperation. By stepping up coordination efforts quietly, Dhaka can influence outcomes without grand announcements. Being central doesn't mean leading from front - sometimes quiet nudges work better than loud demands.

Start with outside nations shifting their building funds into BIMSTEC instead of side deals. That move tends to tighten how the group holds itself together. One way it works is by routing support through shared systems. The structure gains strength when contributions flow centrally. Instead of separate pacts, pooled efforts give it more balance. When aid follows collective paths, coordination improves naturally. It leans on joint platforms, not one-on-one ties. Main thing - unity grows if spending goes through common channels.

Future Research Directions

Looking ahead, this work points to multiple paths for further study. One path involves measuring how BIMSTEC shapes trade flows through statistical models instead of narrative methods alone. Instead of focusing only on one group, comparing small alliances like BIMSTEC with others such as the Quad or AUKUS might reveal broader patterns in how these groups function. Another possibility emerges when considering shifts in global power after 2022 - tracking how Russia interacts with regional bodies in South Asia could deepen understanding in two separate fields at once. That particular thread is where the writer plans to concentrate next during their advanced academic work.^[54]

This work aimed to look at how deep-rooted issues limited the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. What emerged points instead toward smaller group efforts as possible paths forward in the region. Each finding ties back to earlier questions while adding weight to ongoing academic conversations about cooperation across developing regions.

Right off, the report shows SAARC's ongoing struggles come not mainly from how it is built, yet from the messy realities of the area it operates in. Sure, decisions needing full agreement, a thin central team, and tight funding hold it back - still, those flaws stem from something bigger beneath. Picture this: uneven strength among members, especially India towering over others, plus long cold tension with Pakistan turning group consent into silent blockage. Remember Chapter 1's theories? Liberal Institutionalism, Realism, Constructivism, New Regionalism - each sheds light on one angle or another. Yet only when realism's view on imbalance pairs with constructivism's take on missing common belonging does the puzzle snap clear - explaining why strong paper rules lead to near-zero results.

What stands out next is how minilateralism in South Asia works less like a substitute for SAARC and more like a workaround shaped by stagnation. Because one holdout blocked broad consensus, groups such as BIMSTEC and BBIN shifted focus - toward practical progress in transport links, border processes, power sharing, and security coordination. From Chapter 1's idea of club goods comes a clearer picture: smaller circles of collaboration gain efficiency yet lose breadth, solving concrete tasks without mending deep regional divides. Gains emerge in everyday domains, though core tensions remain untouched. Across continents and topics, scholars notice similar patterns - tighter coalitions forming where wider talks stall, and South Asia fits right into that shape.

One possibility stands out when looking at how things might unfold in South Asia: SAARC does not come fully back to life, yet it also doesn't vanish entirely. Instead, different groups operate at once, each playing distinct roles. BIMSTEC takes center stage for practical work around the Bay of Bengal. At the same time, smaller efforts like BBIN push further integration where agreement exists. SAARC stays quiet, inactive for now, yet still present as the sole space where every South Asian country has a seat. It holds onto symbolic weight, able to gather leaders even if little gets done. Evidence from examining various paths points toward this mixed setup as the likely outcome. Still, brighter or darker turns could happen - shaped mostly by whether tensions between India and Pakistan ease or grow worse, along with how deeply outside powers get involved.

Three ways mark this work's academic value. A single analytical lens brings together SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN, showing how institutions weaken while smaller groupings rise. Russian views on South Asian cooperation enter the discussion here, shifting focus away from dominant Western theories. Future paths unfold through organized projections, filling gaps often seen in current studies. Chapter 4 shapes real-world relevance. Ideas appear there meant for regional offices, national authorities, alongside outside actors invested in South Asia's balance and growth.

It starts with limits, yet those gaps sketch where next steps could go. Because documents and existing studies shape most of the work, voices from decision makers stay absent - this shapes what can be claimed. A shifting world scene makes forecasting shaky at best. New work may deepen things by talking directly with top officials, instead of relying only on paper trails. Modeling outcomes using numbers might show how trade shifts affect people across different paths forward. Looking harder at digital links and green concerns could uncover layers now barely touched. These areas stand to matter more with time passing. Outside forces play big roles too - the push and pull among China, India, and Russia in building connections opens wide questions still unexplored. Framing South Asia's struggles alongside larger academic ideas helps sort out why things unfolded as they did. It also builds groundwork for making sense of what comes next. That clarity doesn't come easily - but it begins here.

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Appendices

Appendix A. SAARC Organisational Chart

Appendix A. SAARC Hierarchical Structure			
Level	Body	Members	Role
1 (Apex)	Heads of State/Government Summit	8 heads	Strategic direction
2	Council of Ministers	8 FM's	Policy
3	Standing Committee	8 FSecs	Operations
4	Programming Committee	Senior officials	Budget/Calendar
5 (Admin)	SAARC Secretariat	SG + staff	Coordination
6 (Technical)	11 Technical Committees	Expert officials	Sectoral work
7 (Finance)	SAARC Development Fund	Tripartite board	Project finance

Appendix A. SAARC organisational chart. Source: SAARC Secretariat (2023).

Appendix B. Map of South Asia

Map 1. South Asia and BIMSTEC Region – Country Reference				
Country	Membership	Coordinates	Area	Access
Afghanistan	SAARC member	32.0°N 65.0°E	652,230 km ²	Non-coastal
Bangladesh	SAARC + BBIN + BIMSTEC	23.7°N 90.4°E	147,570 km ²	Bay of Bengal
Bhutan	SAARC + BBIN	27.5°N 90.5°E	38,394 km ²	Landlocked
India	SAARC + BBIN + BIMSTEC	20.6°N 79.0°E	3,287,263 km ²	Indian Ocean

Maldives	SAARC member	3.2°N 73.2°E	298 km²	Indian Ocean
Myanmar	BIMSTEC member	17.1°N 96.0°E	676,578 km²	Bay of Bengal
Nepal	SAARC + BBIN	28.4°N 84.1°E	147,181 km²	Landlocked
Pakistan	SAARC member	30.4°N 69.3°E	881,913 km²	Arabian Sea
Sri Lanka	SAARC + BIMSTEC	7.9°N 80.7°E	65,610 km²	Indian Ocean
Thailand	BIMSTEC member	15.9°N 100.9°E	513,120 km²	Gulf of Thailand

Map 1. Geographical overview of South Asian and BIMSTEC member states. Source: United Nations Cartographic Section, 2023; SAARC Secretariat, 2023.

Appendix C. BIMSTEC Member States

Appendix C. BIMSTEC Member States – Key Data				
Country	Population (mn)	GDP (USD bn)	BIMSTEC Lead Sector	Joined
Bangladesh	172	460	Trade & Investment / Energy	1997
Bhutan	0.8	2.9	Environment	1997
India	1430	3,550	Transport & Communication / Security	1997
Myanmar	54	65	Agriculture / Fisheries	1997
Nepal	30	41	Poverty Alleviation / People-to-People	1997
Sri Lanka	22	74	Technology / Tourism	1997
Thailand	72	550	Trade & Investment (co-lead)	1997

Appendix C. BIMSTEC member states key data. Source: BIMSTEC Secretariat (2022); World Bank (2023).

Appendix D. South Asian Trade Statistics

Appendix D. Intra-SAARC Trade Statistics (USD million, 2018–2022)				
Year	Total Intra-SAARC Trade	% of Total Trade	India Share	Growth YoY
2018	23,400	5.1%	78%	+4.2%
2019	24,100	5.3%	79%	+3.0%
2020	19,800	4.8%	77%	-17.8%
2021	26,500	5.5%	80%	+33.8%
2022	31,200	6.1%	81%	+17.7%

Appendix D. Intra-SAARC trade statistics, 2018–2022. Source: World Bank WITS (2023); UNCTAD STAT (2023).

Appendix E. Regional Cooperation Performance Indicators

Appendix E. South Asian Regional Cooperation Performance Index (SARCPI)			
Indicator	SAARC Score	BIMSTEC Score	ASEAN Benchmark

Intra-regional trade (%)	6.1	6.0*	25.0
Connectivity Index	2.1/10	3.4/10	7.2/10
Institutional Capacity	2.8/10	4.1/10	7.8/10
Political Cohesion	1.9/10	5.2/10	6.9/10
Summit Regularity	1.0/10	6.5/10	8.0/10
Security Cooperation	1.5/10	4.8/10	6.3/10
Overall SARCPI	2.6/10	4.7/10	6.9/10

Appendix E. South Asian Regional Cooperation Performance Index. Note: *BIMSTEC intra-regional trade data overlaps with SAARC data due to shared members. Source: Author's calculation based on World Bank (2023), ASEAN Secretariat (2023), SAARC Secretariat (2023).

Footnotes

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