

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

SAARC stands for South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and is an intergovernmental organization for the development of economic and regional integration. The organization has the support of different countries known as member-states.

SAARC - Latest News

1. The Ministry of External Affairs said India will supply COVID-19 vaccines to SAARC Nations under grant assistance.
2. Recently SAARC member countries turned down Pakistan's proposal to host the grouping's pending summit meeting.
3. Indian Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar had recently noted that cross-border terrorism, obstructing trade, blocking connectivity are three key challenges that SAARC must overcome".
4. Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali had recently urged the SAARC member nations to explore all the viable options to convene the 19th summit of the eight-member regional body at an early date, underlining the need for deeper engagement to collectively fight COVID-19 and develop regional resilience to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.
5. India's proposal to launch a COVID-19 Emergency Fund was given a positive reception by SAARC nations. Within days, all the countries, except Pakistan, contributed to it voluntarily.

In Jan 2021, the Ministry of External Affairs, India announced that the indigenously manufactured COVID-19 vaccines will be supplied to key SAARC member countries in a phased manner.

The below-table gives a quick overview of some of the important points concerning the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for the [IAS Exam](#) preparation.

SAARC Established in	1985 (December 8), Dhaka (Bangladesh) Official site: https://www.saarc-sec.org/
Number of Member Countries in SAARC	8 Countries - India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Pakistan.
Number of Observers in SAARC	9 Observers - Australia, European Union (E.U), Iran, Japan, Mauritius, South Korea, United States of America (USA), China, Myanmar.
SAARC Headquarters	Kathmandu, Nepal
Launch of SAARC Satellite for South Asia	2017
SAARC Specialized Bodies	1. South Asian University (SAU) – India 2. South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) – Dhaka

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> SAARC Development Fund (SDF) – Bhutan SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO) – Pakistan
1st Secretary General of SAARC	Abul Ahsan (Bangladesh)
Current Secretary-General of SAARC	Golam Sarwar (Bangladesh) - Took office on 4 th March 2023.
Last Member to Join SAARC	Afghanistan (April 2007)
Last SAARC Summit	19th SAARC Summit in Pakistan (Cancelled)

SAARC - An Overview

- SAARC was founded by seven states in 1985.
- In 2005, Afghanistan requested its accession to SAARC and formally applied for membership in the same year.
- This organization was formed in Dhaka on December 8, 1985, and its secretariat is based in Kathmandu, Nepal.
- SAARC Potential future members - Turkey and Russia have also applied for SAARC membership.
- SAARC comprises of 8 member states and 9 observer states -

SAARC Member States	SAARC Observer States
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Afghanistan Bangladesh Bhutan India Maldives Nepal Pakistan Sri Lanka 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Australia China European Union Iran Japan Mauritius United States Myanmar Republic of Korea

SAARC - Historical background

- The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first initiated in May 1980. The Foreign Secretaries of the then seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. Five key areas for regional cooperation were identified and with time other important areas were added later.

2. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was set up when its Charter was formally adopted on 8 December 1985 by the Heads of State or Governments of India, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

Also, learn more about the Bay of Bengal Initiative on Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation ([BIMSTEC](#)), a multilateral organization that is of relevance to India from a Geo-political perspective.

Also read, the gist of RSTV's Big Picture Debate on [SAARC vs. BIMSTEC](#) in the linked article.

Areas of Cooperation Among SAARC Nations

- Agriculture and Rural Development
- Human Resource Development and Tourism
- Economic, Trade and Finance
- Social Affairs
- Environment, Natural Disasters and Biotechnology
- Education, Security and Culture and Others
- Information and Poverty Alleviation
- Energy, Transport, Science and Technology

SAARC - Objectives

The main motto of the organization is to work towards a common goal of achieving social, cultural, and economic growth for all the people within the South Asia region.

The objectives of SAARC, as defined in its charter, are as follows:

- Promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and improve their quality of life
- Accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region by providing all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and realize their full potential
- Promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia
- Contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems
- Promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields
- Strengthen cooperation with other developing countries
- Strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interest; and
- Cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

SAARC Principles

Cooperation within the framework of the SAARC shall be based on:

- Respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit.
- Such cooperation shall not be a substitute for bilateral and multilateral cooperation but shall complement them.
- Such cooperation shall not be inconsistent with bilateral and multilateral obligations.

SAARC - Structure

SAARC has the following structure:

1. Council - It is the apex policy-making body. The council is represented by government heads of the respective member countries.
2. Council of Ministers - The Council of Ministers comprises the foreign ministers and they meet generally two times annually.

Council of Ministers - Functions

1. Policy formulation
2. Reviewing the progress of regional cooperation
3. Identifying newer areas of cooperation, and
4. Setting up additional mechanisms as required

Standing Committee

It comprises the foreign secretariat of the member countries. The major functions of the standing committee are stated below:

1. To monitor and coordinate the programs
2. To deal with modalities of financing
3. To mobilize cooperation within and outside the region

Programming Committee

It comprises senior officials of the member governments. The major functions of this committee are as follows:

1. Finalizing the annual meet schedule
2. Budget scrutinization

3. External activities assigned by the standing committee

Technical Committee

It consists of representatives of the member nations. The major functions of the committee are as follows:

1. To formulate projects and monitor the same
2. To submit reports

Secretariat

It is headed by the Secretary-general appointed by the Council of Ministers. The main functions of the Secretariat are as follows:

1. Coordination and execution of activities conducted by SAARC
2. Monitoring the SAARC meetings
3. Work as a communication link between SAARC and other international summits and forums.

SAARC - Regional Centres

Regional Centres established in Member Countries are the supporting pillars to the secretariat for promoting regional cooperation. These Regional Centres are managed by respective Governing entities comprising representatives from Member States, SAARC Secretary-General, and the Ministry of Foreign/External Affairs of the host government.

The Regional Integrated Programme of Action covers the following aspects:

1. Agriculture and Rural Development
2. Women, Youth, and Children
3. Health and Population Activities
4. Science and Technology and Meteorology
5. Environment and Forestry
6. Human Resource Development, and
7. Transport

Working Groups have also been established in the following areas:

1. [Biotechnology](#)
2. [Information and Communications Technology](#)
3. [Intellectual Property Rights](#)
4. Energy

5. Tourism

Significance of SAARC

1. SAARC is the world's most densely populated region and one of the most fertile areas. It comprises 3% of the world's area, 21% of the world's population and 3.8% (US\$2.9 trillion) of the global economy.
2. SAARC countries synergize their actions as they have common traditions, dress, food and culture, and political aspects.
3. The SAARC nations have problems and solutions to the problems in common such as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, natural disasters, internal conflicts, industrial and technological backwardness, low GDP, and poor socio-economic conditions. These nations uplift their living standards by creating common areas of development.

Importance of SAARC for India

1. SAARC is a game-changer for India's Act East Policy. It links South Asian economies with Southeast Asia which will further boost economic integration and prosperity to India mainly in the Services Sector.
2. Primacy to the country's immediate neighbours.
3. Nations of SAARC help in the creation of mutual trust and peace within the region thus promoting stability.
4. SAARC can engage Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka in economic cooperation and development processes to counter China ([OBOR initiative](#)).
5. SAARC offers a platform for India to showcase its leadership in the region by taking up extra responsibilities.

Achievements of SAARC

1. A Free Trade Area is established by the member countries to increase their internal trade and lessen the trade gap of some states considerably. SAARC is comparatively a new organization in the global arena.
2. SAARC Free Trade Agreement - SAFTA was signed to reduce customs duties of all traded goods to zero by the year 2016. The agreement was confined to goods, but excluding all services like information technology.
3. South Asia Preferential Trading Agreement - SAPTA for promoting trade amongst the member countries came into effect in 1995.
4. SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services - SATIS is following the GATS-plus 'positive list' approach for trade in services liberalization.
5. SAARC University - Establish a SAARC university in India, a food bank, and also an energy reserve in Pakistan.

SAARC - Specialized Bodies

The specialized bodies are created by the member states and their structure is different from the regional centers. The management is taken care of by the representatives of the member states the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the host government.

The different SAARC specialized bodies are given below:

1. SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO) - Pakistan
2. SAARC Development Fund (SDF) - Bhutan
3. South Asian University (SAU) - India
4. South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) - Dhaka

A detailed description of SAARC specialized bodies is given below-

1. SAARC Arbitration Council

- It is an inter-governmental body having its office in Pakistan is mandated to provide a legal framework/forum within the region for fair and efficient settlement of commercial, industrial, trade, banking, investment, and such other disputes, as may be referred to it by the member states and their people.

2. SAARC Development Fund (SDF):

Its primary objective is the funding of project-based collaboration in social sectors such as poverty alleviation, development, etc.

- SDF is governed by a Board consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Finance of the Member States. The Governing Council of SDF (Finance Ministers of MSs) oversees the functioning of the Board.

3. South Asian Regional Standards Organization

- South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) has its Secretariat at Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- It was established to achieve and enhance coordination and cooperation among SAARC member states in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed to develop harmonized Standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.

4. South Asian University

- South Asian University (SAU) is an international university, located in India. Degrees and Certificates awarded by the SAU are at par with the respective Degrees and Certificates awarded by the National Universities/ Institutions.

Challenges with SAARC

1. Relation between India and Pakistan escalated tensions and conflicts severely hampers the prospects of SAARC.

2. The frequency of SAARC meetings is low. More engagements between member nations are required instead of biennial meetings SAARC nations should meet annually.
3. The energy and resources are diverted due to the Broad area of cooperation.
4. The implementation of the SAARC Free Trade Agreement has not been satisfactory.

Way Forward with SAARC

1. In a region increasingly targeted by Chinese investment and loans, SAARC could be a common platform to demand more sustainable alternatives for development, or oppose trade tariffs together, or demand better terms for South Asian labour around the world.
2. SAARC, as an organisation, reflects the South Asian identity of the countries, historically and contemporarily. This is a naturally made geographical identity. Equally, there is a cultural, linguistic, religious and culinary affinity that defines South Asia.
3. The member countries should explore the potential of SAARC in maintaining peace and stability in the region.
4. SAARC should be allowed to progress naturally and the people of South Asia, who make up a quarter of the world's population should be offered more people-to-people contact.

Frequently asked questions related to SAARC

Q. Who is the current president of SAARC?

Ans. Golam Sarwar of Bangladesh assumed the office of the Secretary-General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on 04 March 2023.

Q. What is the future of SAARC?

Ans. A lot needs to be done in the future to strengthen SAARC. Member countries need to put joint efforts towards agricultural research as food security is a common problem with all countries. A higher degree of cooperation is needed in the fields of infrastructure development, higher education, energy cooperation etc.

Q. Who is the founder of SAARC?

Ans. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an organization of South Asian nations, founded in December 1985 by Mr. Ziaur Rahman and dedicated to economic, technological, social, and cultural development emphasizing collective self-reliance.

Q. Why is SAARC important to India?

Ans. Foreign trade experts opine that SAARC countries are important for India's exports and surface connectivity among the SAARC member countries could boost trade and economic growth in the region significantly.

Q. What is the motto of SAARC?

Ans. The motto of the SAARC organisation is 'Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity'.

Q. What are the problems of SAARC?

Ans. SAARC has faced problems in the past, mostly attributed to India-Pakistan hostilities. India's problems with Pakistan over Kashmir, terrorism, and nuclear issues have affected the working of SAARC since its inception.

