

Why Regional Cooperation is Facing a Challenge in South Asia

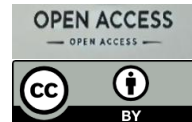
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Abstract

Despite lofty intentions for regional cooperation and connectivity, regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have been unable to turn their vision into reality due to regional diversity, anarchic world structure, and instability in the South Asian region due to foreign meddling. South Asia has long struggled with regional connectivity: infrastructure is weak, political relations are difficult, and regional trade accounts for barely 5% of overall trade. Because of this low degree of trade, the World Bank has classified South Asia as one of the least interconnected areas in the world. This paper will look at how South Asia's idea of regional connection gained traction and why regional connectivity remains a difficulty in the area. By assessing the realist paradigm of state behavior and the emerging consequence of mistrust among the member states of South Asia which generates a lack of political will to integrate, this paper will also inspect foreign intervention in the region, which impedes regional connectivity and growth and seeks to regionalize South Asia in the manner of ASEAN.



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Introduction

To visualize events in the 21st century truly, one must adopt a different set of aesthetics. The 19th century was dominated by Europe whereas the 20th century was dominated by the US (Aslam, 2023). The 21st century is supposed to be dominated by regional powers such as China, India, Russia, Australia, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The Present world politics revolves around the geostrategic, geopolitics, and geo-economics significance of Asia (Yoshimatsu, 2023). The changing

dynamics of South Asia can be evidenced by events such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, The Taliban takeover, China as an emerging power with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan's significance to the Arabian Sea, US geostrategic nexus with India, AUKUS agreement to contain China and emerging Russia, India's proactive strategy in the region, Kashmir a bone of contention between Pakistan and India and last but not the least, Chinese growing influence in Indo Pacific region. All these factors lead to the geostrategic instability of the South Asian region.

The growing rivalry between the US and China and their allies failed regional organizations to perform their core agendas of peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region. The South Asian region is the least connected in the world due to its geo-strategic, economic, and political significance (Saha, 2023). It is a hard nut to crack, despite the eminent organizations why regional cooperation is facing a challenge in South Asia? This article will argue that South Asia has multiple geographic configurations, diverse cultures, complex economic interdependence, and different political and democratic structures and institutions. Regional cooperation in South Asia is characterized by informal, non-binding, and process-oriented institutions. The lack of trust among member states and foreign intervention in the region has caused the least economic, political, and democratic cooperation in South Asia. Therefore, South Asia is facing a challenge in regional cooperation.

Literature Review

Regional Cooperation and South Asia

Today's international system of Globalization and Liberal world order states tend to build bilateral and multilateral agreements with other states to protect and increase their national power, sovereignty, and hegemony in the world. By fostering meaningful collaboration and connectivity, regionalism has the potential to advance human and security cooperation as well as political and environmental cooperation (Griffiths, 2007). As realist theorists argued it is anarchic in the world system and states have to protect their national interests and sovereignty by maximizing their power, to protect their sovereignty states formed regional or sub-regional clutters to increase their resistance to the enormous number of brand-new global issues. Dario argues that social contract theorists significantly explained that before civil society, we lived in a state of nature where the lives of individuals were in danger and there was anarchy. It was a state of war, therefore people decided to enter into civil society by forming a contract to protect their lives and properties from the brutality of humans (Ha & Chuah,

2023). Therefore, it is evident from realists thought cooperation and connectivity for self-help is an undeniable fact in the present world of anarchy.

To protect a state's national interests, interregional and intraregional cooperation is crucial for development. The emergence of new states in the post – World War II era provided a revitalizing force for regional cooperation and connectivity. (Castiglione, 2015). The proliferation of regional organizations following World War II, explains how the world is interconnected and regional cooperation is imperative for state and human security. The Cold War and the bipolar system came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the globe entered a chaotic, transitional phase. Since then, American hegemony has been fading. Following the collapse of the communist bloc and the end of ideological polarization, new threats such as international terrorism and a rise in violent non-state actors arose. The rise of other global powers such as China and Russia have begun to erode American dominance. While Europe has lost its heavyweight status in the new global power balance, the biggest rivalries are now between the US, Russia, and China. The idea of transforming South Asia into a global powerhouse must be considered through a realist lens.

A novel multi-civilizational order known as the Asian system is taking shape, encompassing nations such as Russia, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Indonesia. Its networks of trade, finance, infrastructure, and diplomacy unite five billion individuals and account for forty percent of the global gross domestic product. China has started the development of the new Silk Roads in Asia, but it is not an independent project. Parag Khana (2019) asserts in his book "The Future is Asian" that during the nineteenth century, the world was Europeanized. It underwent Americanization during the 20th century. A greater proportion of the globe is undergoing Asianization in the twenty-first century. Asia is rapidly reverting to trade, warfare, and cultural interactions that date back centuries, predating American and European colonialism (Franco, 2023). The trajectory of Asian destiny is inextricably linked to their assertion of collective interests on a global stage, which in turn influences our own.

Social Contract Theory for The South Asian Region?

Social contract theory elucidates how power influences global politics and how anarchical structures led to the formation of civil society; it is a realist paradigm. Thomas Hobbes, a proponent of the social contract theory, argued in 1985 that the "state of nature would be intolerably brutal." In the state of nature, each person fears for his or her existence. Long-term fulfillment of their requirements and desires is beyond their ability to guarantee. He argues in his

book *Leviathan* that men are inherently self-centered. They exhibit rationality by opting to acknowledge the authority of a sovereign to reside in a civil society that serves their best interests. Individuals made the rational decision to seek refuge from the state of nature.

The state of nature, or the natural state of humanity, is a condition of absolute and total freedom to live one's existence as one pleases without external interference, according to Locke (2003). This does not imply that it is a *Statue of Liberty*, as individuals are not invariably free to act according to their desires or even their own perceived best interests. Despite the absence of governmental authority and civil power to enforce legal accountability, the state of nature does not function as an immoral state. Pre-political in nature, the state of nature is not pre-moral. The absence of civil authority within the state of nature, which would have the capacity to regulate and penalize its citizens, could potentially escalate into a state of war. To circumvent the entire circumstance, males joined civil society.

According to Rousseau (1987), "The state of nature is not the worst possible condition, nor is it war; however, man is perpetually enslaved, despite having been born free, because all free men submit their general wills to one another." According to Rousseau, the State of Nature was a tranquil and irrational era. Individuals led simple, self-sufficient existences. Their necessities were effortlessly satisfied by the forces of nature. As a result of the affluence of the natural environment and the limited population density, competition was unnecessary, and individuals rarely interacted, much less encountered acts of violence or terror. Nevertheless, as the population grows, the notion of private property engenders a state of competition among individuals. As a result of people's increasing desires, the current state of affairs has degenerated into a state of war. To circumvent this situation, humans have decided to give their general will to a single individual.

The social contract hypothesis investigates the characteristics of the relationship between a government and its constituents. In the scholarly field of international relations, this is often expressed in Hobbesian terms: when individuals sacrifice portions of their liberty in return for security. In other words, the connection is sensible and transactional. In contrast, Rousseau characterized 'government' as a manifestation of the collective volition of the people within his seminal work on the social compact (Muoghalu, 2023). The social contract in this narrative represents an emotional bond. Governments serve the dual purpose of embodying the populace's sentimental disposition and furnishing them with

essential resources. Due to its considerable dimensions, populace, and cultural heterogeneity, the Asian region presents an expanded array of approaches through which this correlation is manifested. Succumbing to this matter from a singular Asian perspective would be trite in light of the region's diversity. Conversely, several recent occurrences will have an impact on Asia's approach to the social contract (Gaskarth, 2017). It is anticipated that the resurgence of authoritarianism, the impact of technology, the persistence of inequality, and foreign interference will all exert pressure on the region's existing governance structures and challenge conventional notions of the social compact.

The South Asia region exhibits geographic interconnectivity but is devoid of economic, commercial, trade, cultural, educational, diplomatic, political, scientific, and technological connectivity. This lack of connectivity can be attributed to the divergent interests of regional powers and the external interference of major powers, including the United States. Asia comprises a vast landmass and is home to a collective population of 2 billion individuals. These regions are inherently complex due to their abundance of natural resources, diversity of cultures, and distinct political systems (Ahmer, 2021). Regional organizations SAARC, ECO, ASEAN, and SCO all failed to accomplish their objectives due to a lack of political will, intra-member rivalry, and foreign intervention. To foster regional cooperation and connectivity, these organizations must surmount obstacles and collaborate harmoniously to advance economic and regional progress in the area (Ahmed, 2023). South Asian leadership vitality is essential for regional connectivity, but the leadership void within organizations is a significant impediment to the absence of coordination among member states.

Realist Theory of State Behavior and Anarchical Structure of South Asia

To examine the instability and least cooperation of the Asia region needs to be analyzed through the lens of realism. The majority of realists agree that the nature of relations between states has not changed significantly. State action is dictated by the imperfect human character of its leaders (Griffiths, 2007). The desire to accumulate more power is rooted in human nature, therefore, resulting in the anarchical system of the international realm; states desire to gain more and more power to counter the threats of rivals. The anarchical system creates insecurity among states, they move towards survival by accumulating power. Some states formed alliances to counter the hegemonic nature of their rival states (Sinha & Minha, 2023).

South Asia is least integrated with the world due to deeply rooted distrust among the member states, which have a collective history, culture, population,

politics, and the impact of foreign influence in the region, China as an emerging power poses a threat to India and its hegemonic power, therefore, India is more inclined towards the US. US withdrawal from Afghanistan left a vacuum in the region that might be filled by the emerging China (Yodpet et al., 2023). To contain China and retain its presence in Asia US formed a Nexus with India, AUKUS, and QUAD showing that the US wants to maintain its position as a hegemonic in Asia. China's BRI project that integrates Asia with other continents, AUKUS, and QUAD is in response to China's containment. All these ongoing circumstances show that the Realist paradigm is quite applicable to South Asia where all states are in a constant struggle to maintain power and remain hegemonic by accumulating power and forming alliances.

Security and Greater Integration in South Asia

In security studies, two conflicting schools of thought conceive security differently: wideners and traditionalists. Barry Buzan challenges conventional security thinking, arguing that security is a sort of politics that can be applied to a variety of concerns. Furthermore, he uses a constructivist perspective that differentiates the securitization and politicization processes. Security's various characteristics and dynamics are investigated in five areas: military, political, economic, environmental, and sociological (Buzan et al., 1996). The overarching picture shows that although global security complexes rule the economic sphere, regional security complexes rule the military, political, and sociological spheres.

The security of South Asia not only depends on the stability of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute but also depends on the economic, social, environmental, political, and military security in terms of greater integration on all levels such as Humanitarian development, Climate initiative. The traditional concept of security that is military security is not consistent in this present world of complex interdependence. Now world politics is moving towards the Pacific region, as the US naval document in 2007 signifies this region with an Asia pivot strategy (Tse, 2023). The Pacific region is of great significance as 80% of seaborne oil trade through this region, is rich in natural resources, therefore, making it a strategic competition for world politics.

China's Greater claim over the South China Sea with the imaginary 3 dash line, BRI strings of pearls, AUKUS pact, RCEP, and QUAD, all these events show the significance of this region China's rivalry is at a peak, now the world is moving towards multi-polarity with emerging regional powers such as Russia, India, China, and Turkey (Neelakantan, 2023). Pakistan, Russia, Afghanistan, and

Iran's inclination towards China and India's inclination towards US making this region more unstable and insecure.

Power and Multi-Faceted Interdependency in South Asia

Due to globalization the world is moving towards complex interdependence. Now soft power is more important for countries to survive in the world with complete integration at social, economic as well and military levels (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Organizations such as SAARC, ECO, ASEAN, and other bilateral agreements are outcomes of complex interdependences of world politics. These organizations have to reiterate their core vision to establish regional stability in the region with increased integration at the economic, social, and military levels.

Modi's reckless decision to abrogate articles 370 and 35A of Kashmir caused the deteriorating condition of Muslims in Kashmir, recent statistics show that until now 400,000 Kashmiris have been killed, 2500 widows, 19478,652 unknown graves have been found in 89 villages of 6 districts of Kashmir with 8 to 10,000 forced disappearance of Kashmiris (IPRI, 2021). The Kashmir issue is a major concern of regional organizations and their member states because it creates distrust among the regional states and undermines their stability and security.

The fragile condition of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal poses a serious threat to regional stability; Afghanistan is a landlocked country with a diverse culture, history, ethnic history, and different political systems. It is rich in mineral deposits and a heart to the central Asia region. Regional countries have different approaches to Taliban takeover, as China has recognized the Taliban and started negotiations with them because she can sabotage her BRI project and is unable to face terrorist threats with her aim of becoming a regional power. Pakistan is also ready to cooperate with the Taliban government if they develop a diplomatic government in Afghanistan and ensure that Afghan soil will not be used against Pakistan (Gupta et al., 2023). The same case is for Iran and other border countries as they cannot take the delicate situation of Afghanistan with terrorism and civil wars, therefore, all the regional countries and their organizations are willing to help Afghanistan in the establishment of democracy, human rights development with greater integration in economic, social, political and military engagement in BRI.

South Asia's Least Connected Region Awakens to Difficulties

Throughout history, South Asia has encountered challenges in maintaining regional connectivity as a result of inadequate infrastructure, tense political relations, and a negligible 5% share of global trade. The World Bank has categorized South Asia as one of the least interconnected regions globally on account of its limited level of trade. Ironically, current efforts to enhance connectivity in South Asia are more prone to fostering divisions among nations than promoting unity. As Pakistan seeks opportunities in Afghanistan and Central Asia and India advances initiatives in its eastern region, sub-regional infrastructure initiatives are undergoing implementation (Kugelman, 2022). The most recent arena in which Islamabad and New Delhi have engaged in combat is infrastructure development.

Pakistan's energy minister declared on January 15 that talks with Russia to build a gas pipeline from Kazakhstan to Pakistan are in progress. Islamabad's newest endeavor to improve connectivity with Kabul and Central Asia. CPEC a part of BRI, is Pakistan's longest-running connectivity project (Kaur et al., 2023) and due to security and funding issues, it slowed down last year, but Islamabad, which wants to extend CPEC to Kabul, still considers it a top priority. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia-1000 project, which seeks to transport hydropower from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are two additional endeavors in which Pakistan has participated in the past but encountered financial difficulties. The decision to concentrate on Pakistan is logical and strategic from a geographical and practical perspective. There are fewer security hazards to the development of infrastructure in Afghanistan now that the conflict has been officially resolved. Pakistan will have an easier time navigating Central Asia, where Moscow exerts considerable influence and Islamabad competes with New Delhi if relations between the two nations continue to strengthen.

Presently, India is directing its attention towards the antithesis of South Asia. By leveraging its involvement in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), it has advanced the cause of integration. BIMSTEC comprises, except for Pakistan, Thailand, Myanmar, and five South Asian countries. Contemporary BIMSTEC agreements furnish designs for interconnected electrical networks. Additionally, India has authorized the use of its infrastructure by other countries, resulting in electricity-sharing agreements with Bangladesh and Nepal. The eastern movement of India also seems to be a strategic one. (2023, Islam et al.). The westward connectivity

that India aspires to achieve is severely constrained by Pakistan's denial of transit trade privileges. The influence of New Delhi in Kabul has diminished since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. India has suggested that adopting BIMSTEC could marginalize Pakistan within its borders. Moreover, BIMSTEC is an attractive business collaborator due to the nearly \$3 trillion in combined GDP of its members. Both the connectivity initiatives of Pakistan and India encounter obstacles. Despite the conclusion of the conflict in Afghanistan, persistent economic challenges and terrorist threats remain significant obstacles to the development of infrastructure in the country. Additionally, political unrest exists in Central Asia. Financing remains a concern. BIMSTEC operates with inadequate funding and no free trade agreement. Border disputes present an additional obstacle. On January 16, Nepal voiced its opposition to the road construction by India across disputed territory (Skizzomat, 2021). Enhancing relations between India and Pakistan shortly appears improbable, which is a prerequisite for regional connectivity initiatives in South Asia. Sub-regional connectivity may presently offer the most favorable outcome, thereby impeding the progress of broader regional integration.

Even though trade and connectivity in South Asia have been held hostage by a trust gap and a lack of political will, the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in thousands of deaths from a lack of oxygen and medicine, have once again brought into stark relief the need to permit the flow of essential goods and movement in the region. Just 5% of trade between the eight South Asian nations happens within the region, making it one of the world's most isolated areas. 25% of intraregional trade is carried out by the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), which is composed of 10 nearby countries (Mustapha, 2023).

In the past forty years ago, the region has become more isolated, even though it was once more connected during this period. Inadequate maritime, air, and road transportation is merely one of the factors contributing to the restriction of intraregional commerce. Real and imagined non-tariff barriers, protective tariffs, investment restrictions, and a general lack of trust in the region are some of the other problems that the CSEP research found. The lack of regional aviation connectivity in South Asia is particularly evident in the absence of flights between Nepal and Pakistan, as well as between smaller locations such as Yangon, Myanmar, and Port Blair, India. Beyond its maritime boundaries with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, India shares an extensive network of international land borders spanning 15,106 kilometers (9,386 miles), which include Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Burma, Nepal, and Pakistan. The ICPs facilitated land-based commerce

worth more than 40% of India's total with Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Pakistan during the 2019–20 period, amounting to over \$7.9 billion. On the contrary, trade with neighboring countries constituted a mere 3.5% of India's total international commerce (Meniado, 2023).

The UNESCAP South Asia Gravity Model estimates that intraregional commerce in South Asia was worth \$26.8 billion in 2014 compared to a potential of \$81.2 billion, making it the least interconnected sub-region in the world. As a result, more than 67% of the potential for commerce is not being used. Additionally, by 2020, this potential may more than double to around \$172 billion. Regional trade liberalization and improved regional economy (UN Report, 2018). All member countries can see considerable welfare gains by reducing trade costs through facilitation. This will encourage more equal regional growth, particularly for the smaller, poorer countries in the sub-region. According to the findings of the UNESCAP-SANEM South Asia Model, a 40% reduction in trade costs to the level observed among ASEAN members would yield substantial benefits for exports and welfare. Specifically, it would lead to an almost 11% increase in intraregional exports and a nearly 3% growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) of South Asia (Huaicun et al., 2023). There is still unexplored potential for the establishment of regional value chains or production networks, in addition to opportunities for intraregional trade in investments and services.

Numerous factors contribute to the limited extent of intraregional trade. These include exorbitant costs associated with intraregional trade, inadequate supply capacity in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) of the region, insufficient trade facilitation at borders, and the continued presence of numerous non-tariff barriers. To promote the development of regional value chains or industrial networks, this study proposes the establishment of a South Asia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (SACEP) through the consolidation and improvement of current trade and investment cooperation initiatives (Ao, 2023). Seven important policy areas that SACEP could focus on are: a) encouraging investment to build regional value chains; b) making it easier to travel and trade across land borders; c) coordinating international payment arrangements and rules of origin for goods; and d) making it easier for people to travel and do business across land borders.

What Kind of Regional Connectivity Does South Asia Aspire to?

Although structural contradictions prevent Central, South, and West Asia from replicating the European experience of regionalism and connectivity, the three regions comprising ECO and SAARC can undoubtedly benefit from the

successful transformation of Europe into a relatively peaceful and prosperous place on a continent ravaged by war. Following the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 through the Franco-German Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1963 and culminating in the European Community (EU) transformation with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, the trajectory towards regional cooperation in Europe has been marked by numerous challenges and obstacles (UN Report, 2018). While the ECO and SAARC may derive additional insights from the EU, the preservation of good governance, the rule of law, and the justice system stand as the most critical. In European Union member states, populism increasingly threatens enlightenment and egalitarianism. It has an impact on almost all of the European Union's member states. The prevalence of far-reaching threats against immigrants and individuals of other cultures is increasing dramatically. However, xenophobia and acts of violence targeting religious or racial minorities are predominantly averted through the implementation of legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms. A pragmatic approach and consistent endeavor are essential for ECO and SAARC members to recognize that promising results will not be swiftly achieved in the absence of a pragmatic strategy and connectivity (Hafeez et al., 2012).

Through the lens of regionalism research, the theory and practice of European integration have predominated. Despite facing growing criticism and acknowledging the diversity of regional integration and regionalism, Eurocentrism continues to exert considerable influence over the academic and proportional discourse surrounding comparative regionalism. The Europe-centered view sees regionalism as having many aspects and being well-established as both a way to describe and suggest what should be done, while the rest of the world sees regionalism and regional integration as not being well-established enough and being limited to economic or security issues (Sharma & Varshney, 2023) making comparisons difficult. A consensus regarding the precise definition of the Asian continent is lacking. As a result of the debate over which sub-regions should be included and which should be excluded, as well as which facets of regionalism (including security, economy, politics, and identity) should be examined, the definition of regionalism has changed. This variation serves to underscore the difficulties associated with regarding the region as a "given" and the constraints of focusing exclusively on a regional scale or organization (Soderbaum, 2011).

Nevertheless, a substantial corpus of scholarly work on Asian regionalism focuses on the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN). Historically, this emphasis has appeared to be primarily attributable to the fact that ASEAN is

one of the few enduring regional organizations in greater Asia. This observation seems to be influenced, to some degree, by the discipline's tendency to prioritize state-led regional organizations over more extensive processes of regionalization and region formation. Informal, or "soft," regionalism and the formation of collective identity have garnered considerable interest in East Asia over the past few decades. The primary emphasis of this study is the correlation between formality and informality (specifically within regional organizations, such as the Chinese system) rather than informal procedures in and of themselves (Anwar, 2023). A comprehensive system of informal assemblies, working groups, and advisory groups exists, including but not limited to the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the ASEAN Plus Three (comprising China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea). The aforementioned informal approach to decision-making, occasionally labeled the "ASEAN Way" or "soft institutionalism," integrates its inherent ethical standards as opposed to the formal bureaucratic frameworks and legalistic processes that characterize the European (and North American) approach. The foundation of this approach consists of tact, informality, pragmatism, consensus-building, and non-confrontational negotiating methods (Shakoor, 2021).

Nevertheless, the ASEAN Way does bear a degree of resemblance to the illiberal underpinnings of the notion of "Asian values," which posits an explanation for the region's economic prosperity through the promotion of a communitarian ethic ("society over the self"). This suggests that cultural elements are substantially influential in delineating the ASEAN Way and its distinctions from European culture. As a result, regarding EU-style institutionalization as the ideal paradigm for regionalism is problematic. These evaluations disregard alternative outcomes and dynamics in favor of a particular formality.

Studies of regionalism in the European Union and other parts of the world do not ignore informal regionalism completely. However, the Asian case study makes a valuable contribution to comparative and European regionalism by showing the strong link between formal and informal regionalism and regionalization (Sadiq et al., 202). The Asian situation provides ample evidence that meaningful and genuine regional patterns and dynamics can be discussed, even if they are not necessarily replicated through formal regional initiatives. The case of Asia underscores the importance of scrutinizing both the formal and informal aspects of regionalism and regionalization from a broader perspective. Additionally, it raises inquiries regarding the informality that sustains and follows formal regional initiatives. From the preceding discourse, it can be deduced that

South Asia aspires to an approach to regionalism known as "soft regionalism," which harmonizes formal and informal elements while safeguarding national sovereignty.

Key policy areas encompass the following: a) promotion of investment to foster regional value chains; c) facilitation of travel and trade across land borders; d) encouragement of investment to advance trade in goods; e) harmonization of product standards and conformity assessment procedures; f) cumulative rules of origin and industrial cooperation; and g) coordination of international payment arrangements.

Recommendations

SAARC, ASEAN, and ECO must work together to eliminate obstacles that have impeded economic development and the free movement of capital, people, goods, and services throughout South Asia to enhance regional cooperation and connectivity.

Asia's connectivity hinges on dynamic leadership. Ironically, South Asia has a leadership vacuum, which significantly hinders the emergence of regionalism. Strong economic, trade, and commercial relations can significantly reduce the amount of mistrust and suspicion between the nations in that region. Also, sustainable growth will be aided by viable commerce, which will lead to a huge increase in employment and business prospects.

South Asian states have numerous opportunities to collaborate and engage in economic interaction within the domains of education, tourism, information technology, science, and travel.

Soft regionalism and informal gatherings that strive for social, cultural, and economic fusion are necessary for regional connectedness and collaboration in South Asia.

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