

# Investigating the Causes of Intraregional Challenges of SAARC

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## **Abstract:**

SAARC is a regional cooperation organization in South Asia that has not played a significant role in regional convergence in South Asia in reducing tensions and solving regional crises since its establishment. Serious challenges among SAARC members have made regional cooperation difficult. The actors in this region view each other with suspicion, which has increased tensions and instability in the region. As the causes of intraregional challenges of SAARC are discussed in this article, the central question raised is: What are the factors of intraregional challenges of SAARC? The hypothesis of this research has been raised as follows: Political differences, land disputes, and border disputes have put regional cooperation among SAARC members under strain and intensified competition, which is discussed in this research. This research is descriptive-analytical and the method of data collection is library-based. The current research is important in that it examines the internal challenges among SAARC members and highlights it. The findings of this research indicate that SAARC member countries have become victims of regional political competition, resulting in intensified arms competition, increased poverty, and hindering regional economic and trade development.

**Keywords:** South Asia, SAARC, Area of south Asia & challenges of SAARC

## **Introduction**

South Asia, including Afghanistan, comprises eight countries, all of which are members of SAARC. This organization was established to promote social and cultural development, improve the quality of life and economic growth, strengthen scientific and cultural relations, and foster cooperation among member countries. However, territorial and border disputes among SAARC members, such as India

with Pakistan and Pakistan with Afghanistan, have caused the organization to face difficulties in implementing its programs. On the other hand, the organization itself does not have much authority, and the political decisions of member countries determine various issues. Also, SAARC strives not to interfere in the internal affairs of its members. Political and territorial disputes in South Asia have become an obstacle to economic convergence, reducing the role of SAARC in South Asia. Today, SAARC plays a vague role limited to holding annual conferences and negotiations among its members.

The natural, human, and cultural geography of South Asia, the diverse models of political management of governments, the economic structure, and the motivations for development and industrialization of the countries in the region are potential capacities for formulating regionalist policies. Despite these advantages, some problems and disagreements among governments and societies have created grounds for divergence and conflict among countries, sometimes complicating issues. (Mosfa and Norouzi, 2014: 630) In addition, South Asia is one of the most unstable and densely populated regions in the world, with the Kashmir crisis being one of the main factors contributing to regional insecurity in South Asia. The Kashmir crisis has remained unresolved since the separation of India and Pakistan and has shaped regional and international arrangements in South Asia, mainly revolving around India and Pakistan. The issues of the SAARC region (South Asia), whether military, economic, political or security-related, are influenced by the disagreements between these two key members, India and Pakistan. The internal challenges of SAARC are mainly affected by the disagreements between these two key members, casting a shadow over the relations of other SAARC countries and necessitating that other SAARC countries also move around India and Pakistan. The current research question is: What are the causes of SAARC's internal challenges? The assumption of this research is that political disputes, territorial and border disputes have put the cooperation environment among SAARC members at risk and intensified competitions among the members of this organization. The main objective of this research is to investigate and explain the causes of SAARC's internal challenges. In this regard, why this organization has not been able to overcome those challenges that have caused this regional

organization to fail in resolving the crisis in this region. The research method in the present study is a library method, and the type of research is descriptive-analytical.

## Research Background

Numerous books and articles have been written about the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), including an article titled "SAARC Treaty and Its Impact on Regionalism" by Mohammad Javad Aghajari and Simin Sadat Rostamifar, published in 2012 in the International Relations Research Journal. This article attempts to highlight the impacts of the SAARC treaty on regional cooperation. The present article examines the lack of regional cooperation among SAARC members. Another article titled "Institutional Regionalism in South Asia: Efficiency Evaluation of SAARC, SAPTA and NAFTA" by Seyed Ahmad Fatemina was published in 2014 in the "Political and International Approaches Journal". This article studies the efficiency and performance of the SAARC organization in South Asia. The current article aims to understand the reasons for SAARC's inefficiency in South Asia, which has failed to become an influential regional organization. A book titled "Regionalism in Asia: A Look at ASEAN, SAARC, and ECO" by Dr. Ali Omid was published in 2009 by the Office of Political and International Studies of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This book studies the function of SAARC as a regional organization; however, the present research focuses on the internal challenges among SAARC.

Thus, this article is a new topic and no one has yet studied the internal challenges of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Therefore, the current research is fresh and new.

## Theoretical Framework

The challenges that exist in South Asia have attracted global attention and caused concern for the countries in this region. Some countries in this region are unstable politically. This is while regional cooperation and convergence require political stability. If countries face internal challenges and crises, there is no opportunity for extroversion and international cooperation. (Omid, 2009: 177) The degree of regional convergence, according to Cantori and Spiegel, is determined by four social, political, economic, and organizational factors. These theorists believe that

social cohesion and the similarity of social dimensions of units play a role in creating regional cohesion or otherwise lack thereof. Similarity and homogeneity between the types of political system and regime can be a stimulus for strengthening regional convergence according to these theorists. The factor of economic complementarity and resource distribution, along with the organizational factor, will assist in the cohesion or separation of regional actors. (Seifzadeh, 2013: 304) In the regional organization SAARC, one of the main problems is the non-complementarity of members' economies, which compete instead of cooperating. Today, analysts are very interested in studying regional disputes and how to deal with them. Generally, it is assumed that regional disputes will remain as the main concern of policymakers; because they both count as threats against peace and security measures and cause complex problems in managing security issues. Regional dispute causes a general, overall, and regional approach to be raised in mind that used to be secured by force and power. (Lake and Morgan, 2016: 41) From a security perspective, a region means a specific and well-known quasi-system for security relations between a set of states that are geographically close and historically, the idea of a regional system has been influential in balance of power thoughts. The current understanding of regional security patterns is so weak that one can readily accept, through valuable study from other perspectives about South Asia's security, that the choice of a specific set of countries as a region has necessarily been subject to arbitrary definitions. (Buzan, 2010: 213) Customs unions are one form of convergence among states. In these arrangements, states remove customs duties from their trade relations but devise a common external tariff and apply it against all other states. Arrangements related to customs unions are usually based on several stages of coordination among member states. (Moshirzadeh, 2016: 40) In SAARC, the customs unions SAPTA and NAFTA were created for this purpose; but they were not very successful in implementing their programs.

### **The Establishment of SAARC**

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is an active regional organization in South Asia, consisting of Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The organization

was established in 1985. Insecurity is one of the most serious issues in South Asia that has threatened the security, peace, and stability of the geographical area for many years. The organization has taken measures to combat instability and insecurity over the years.

Bangladesh gained independence amid tensions and violent events between India and Pakistan in 1971 and took the initiative to establish friendly relations in the region. The then President of Bangladesh (Ziaur Rahman) proposed regional cooperation among the countries of the region after visiting India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. In 1980, Ziaur Rahman took the first step towards problem-solving by sending letters to the heads of state in the region. The meeting of foreign ministers of seven countries in the region (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan) in Colombo in 1981 was intended to set the agenda for following up on Ziaur Rahman's idea of forming a regional organization; however, the atmosphere of conflict and mistrust prevented this idea from being implemented. Two years later, in 1983, at a meeting of foreign ministers of the aforementioned countries held in New Delhi, a program called "Program to Complete Performance" was officially discussed to formally start regional cooperation. This event was planned for 1985 in conjunction with the foreign ministers' conference in Dhaka and on December 8, 1985, with the signing of an agreement, the South Asian Union for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established and started its work. This significant move stemmed from the realistic perception of political leaders about internal and environmental conditions in the region at that time. However, Pakistan initially opposed this proposal, fearing that India would dominate this group. India was also dissatisfied, perhaps because it saw this plan as a means to limit its dominance.

The founders of SAARC also considered fundamental objectives that reflect respect for the principles of equal sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, respect for mutual interests, emphasis on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and the need for coordination and cooperation with bilateral and multilateral commitments of member countries. Regional convergence in South Asia took shape in the form of SAARC. SAARC, the largest regional organization with the participation of seven countries in 1985, with goals such as improving welfare and improving social

quality, accelerating economic growth, economic and cultural development in the region, and providing a dignified life for the people of the region, enhancing and consolidating self-reliance and collective understanding and understanding of members' problems, promoting cooperation and mutual assistance in economic, cultural, technical and scientific fields, strengthening cooperation with other developing countries and strengthening cooperation among members in international forums, started its work. During its years of activity, SAARC has always strived to implement the approved basic and fundamental objectives and principles and establish regionalism in this region. From its founding to now, SAARC has taken a series of actions, the most important of which have been related to agriculture, health and hygiene, women's and youth empowerment and child protection, poverty reduction and human resource development.

The initial goal of SAARC was to maintain peace in South Asia and create an opportunity for interaction among its members; however, later five major goals were considered for it: 1- Better communication; 2- Facilitating trade and investment; 3- Expanding tourism; 4- Cooperation in the electricity and energy sector; 5- Strengthening the private sector.

In general, the goal of SAARC is to stabilize the region by strengthening regional cooperation and improving welfare and quality of life. The main headquarters of this organization is in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, and its annual meetings are held in each country. Currently, Iran, China, Mauritius, Japan, South Korea, Australia, America and the European Union are considered observer members of the SAARC organization.

### **SAARC Regional Challenges**

South Asia is one of the last regions to be formed with the emergence of new regional challenges and has so far been somewhat isolated within Asia. The SAARC organization, as the regional organization of South Asia, does not have much authority and everything is related to the political will of member states. Institutionally, SAARC has provided the prerequisites for regional cooperation. Currently, we can talk about SAARC's infrastructure for regional cooperation to convergence. Although SAARC has been able to prepare long-term programs for creating a free trade area; but its main members are still inconsistent in approving

initial documents. It seems that SAARC has been able to draw up a long-term trade strategy for South Asia; however, the implementation of this plan faces many obstacles. SAARC has approved documents in other areas of interest to members such as poverty and agriculture, and has created institutions based on them. (Karimi et al., 2021: 282)

The leaders of the SAARC member countries seem to believe that political tensions and border disputes have been a major factor in the separation of nations and countries in the region; therefore, the founders of SAARC hoped that by gradually giving importance to cooperation in soft policy areas such as trade and economic affairs, they could overcome such problems that hinder cooperation and peace in the region. (Aghajari and Rostamifar, 2012: 25) One of the most important factors of divergence or regional challenge of SAARC is severe poverty and the complementary nature of the economy of these countries; because most of these countries are among the developing countries of the world and agriculture, services, and export of raw materials are their main sources of income. This factor has caused the trade relations of countries to be extra-regional instead of intra-regional. Therefore, the volume of extra-regional trade is about five percent, which indicates the complementarity of the economy of the countries in this region. (Ibid., 2021: 282)

There are various challenges facing SAARC member countries, such as:

- 1- Political differences between India and Pakistan and their hostile relations, especially territorial disputes over Jammu and Kashmir;
- 2- The problem of dividing the Ganges River between India and Bangladesh;
- 3- Disputes between India and Sri Lanka over the Tamil Tigers separatist group;
- 4- Dense population density, economic weakness, and resource poverty;
- 5- Disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Durand Line;
- 6- The decision-making method in this organization, which is based on consensus, and as a result, creates obstacles to the decision-making process of this organization. (Mousizadeh, 2016: 329)

In general, the problem of South Asian countries is collective. If all South Asian countries (eight countries) have common racial, geographical, and cultural characteristics; widespread poverty, underdeveloped infrastructures, weak relations, rebellions, long-term mistrust and suspicion of each other have been the

characteristics of this region and are full of contradictions. (Delinic and Pandey, 2013: 15) Given this, there are many problems in South Asia that have not yet been resolved with a strong will to solve the problems of this region and the obstacles that exist in cooperation have not been removed: hence, a failed regional organization in regional convergence that its main challenges are discussed below:

### **1. Differing Perspectives of Large and Small Members**

South Asian countries have had differing views on regionalism and the formation of regional institutions. India and Pakistan, as the largest and most important countries in South Asia, were wary of their rival's behavior in the organization on one hand, and pursued their unilateral goals on the other. In contrast, smaller South Asian countries supported any initiative and plan for regional cooperation and convergence, preferring the existence of regional institutions to their absence. (Fateminijad, 2016: 100) In this case, the views of small and large SAARC members are studied separately:

A- Perspective of Large Members: India and Pakistan are among the large and powerful members of SAARC. Pakistan believed that by joining SAARC, it could benefit from strengthening its relations with other smaller regional countries and use the organization to reduce India's influence. Pakistan was also concerned that India was using SAARC to bolster its hegemony and that its own (Pakistan's) membership would damage its close relations with West Asia. Islamabad leaders believed that the regional organization SAARC could potentially damage their freedom in foreign affairs and become a tool for India to unite the subcontinent against Pakistan, guarantee a regional market for Indian goods, and consequently consolidate its economic domination over the region. Therefore, Pakistan was not inclined towards SAARC's growth and refrained from establishing trade relations with India.

In contrast, India initially feared SAARC and the possibility of Western involvement in the organization, as well as the potential for SAARC to unite India's neighbors and pressure New Delhi. In other words, India was worried that the formation of SAARC could provide an opportunity for smaller neighbors to regionalize all bilateral issues and unite with Pakistan against India. Indians believed that if regional cooperation became institutionalized and decisions were made based on votes, India would lose its position. (Fateminijad, 2016: 101) India

is significantly superior to all SAARC member countries in terms of political, economic, and military perspectives, and apart from Pakistan, it has no other competitor in this organization. India's power has greatly increased and consolidated in the region in recent years, without India, SAARC has no specific credibility. Even from an economic perspective, India has a noticeable superiority over other members of this organization, effectively putting the organization under its influence. From one perspective, India is considered a jack-of-all-trades in the SAARC group; as it holds about 72% of the area, 77% of the population, 84% of arable land, and 90% of natural resources of the SAARC countries and pays 22% of the secretariat's expenses, making it the largest and most influential country and the mother of all others. (Dehghan and Kazemi, 2011) SAARC member countries have legitimized India's role and the conflict with Pakistan has been maintained at a high level, while other countries are optimistic about India's regional role.

B- Perspective of Small Members: The SAARC organization enhances the power and improves the position of small or weak countries at the regional and global level. Despite its failures, SAARC has provided a desirable opportunity for small South Asian countries to play a role. Small members are the main supporters of regular meetings and activities of this organization. Moreover, SAARC has created awareness and regional identity in South Asia. This regional identity can serve as a platform for addressing regional considerations at the global level. The promotion of regional convergence in South Asia has been damaged by regional political disputes, especially the dispute between India and Pakistan, but the prospects for convergence are slowly improving and can extricate themselves from the shadow of the India-Pakistan dispute. Furthermore, SAARC can be a bridge between small and large South Asian countries. India and Pakistan have also managed to use this regional center to strengthen their social and economic ties with smaller member countries, while maintaining their specific considerations. Although SAARC has not been successful in connecting India and Pakistan to each other, it has individually connected each of them to the smaller countries in the region. Ultimately, SAARC has helped to liberalize the economy in small countries and can pave the way for their economic blossoming and convergence.

## 2. Bilateral Instead of Multilateral Transactions

One of the other reasons for SAARC's failure to strengthen regional cooperation is the bilateral approach that has further weakened SAARC. The competition between India and Pakistan has led New Delhi to enter into bilateral negotiations with regional countries, which in itself has limited the space for multilateral transactions. Therefore, some Pakistani analysts believe that India's bilateralism has led to SAARC's failure. On the other hand, Indians argue that many of this country's issues with its neighbors are essentially bilateral and not a concern for other member countries. These failures have led to various views on the status of SAARC and its future prospects. (Fateminijad, 2016: 105)

Bilateral relations have led to the establishment of a free trade agreement between India and Sri Lanka since 1998 onwards, and a similar agreement has been formed between India and Bangladesh, and in practice, a real free trade regime operates between India and Nepal, India and Bhutan. (Farrell et al., 2015: 364) To overcome obstacles and limitations, agreements to facilitate free trade are on the agenda. India has also tried to expand bilateral cooperation with SAARC member countries. The country-to-country approach has brought many economic benefits to India. Despite bilateral and multilateral agreements, intra-regional trade is limited. (Karimi, 2022: 147) South Asian countries have tried to expand various arrangements, bilateral trade cooperation among themselves. Among these arrangements, one can refer to the trade agreements India-Maldives 1981, India-Nepal 1991, India-Bhutan 1995, India-Afghanistan 2003, India-Sri Lanka 1998, India-Bangladesh 2006, Pakistan-Nepal 2002, Pakistan-Sri Lanka 2002 and Sri Lanka- Maldives. It is observed that both India and Pakistan have a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka and thus, the most advanced economies of South Asia are connected through bilateral agreements. Among them, India and Pakistan, apart from granting each other full MFN status, do not have any significant trade agreements. (Fateminijad, 2016: 108) While Article 2 of the Charter of this organization explicitly considers bilateral issues outside its agenda.

## 3. Extra-Regional Trade Instead of Intra-Regional Trade

Initially, South Asian countries had a conservative and restrictive approach towards foreign direct investment; however, this policy changed after the 1990s. This has led to an increase in foreign direct investment in the South Asia region.

(Fateminijad, 2013: 141) But South Asian countries have primarily faced two major problems in the field of regional trade institutions. On the one hand, the amount of legal trade within this region is very low, and on the other hand, until the mid-1990s, there was no specific and comprehensive trade institution in this region. This was largely due to extensive trade barriers in this region, some of which were intra-regional trade barriers in South Asia such as security and democracy-related obstacles, disputes and bilateral tensions among member countries, high transportation costs, border barriers, lack of a coordinated transportation system, problems in cargo loading and unloading, maritime transport difficulties and ports, complicated customs procedures and non-transparent management procedures in customs affairs. To overcome these trade barriers, South Asian countries thought about establishing a specialized trade institution among themselves several years after the establishment of SAARC. (Fateminijad, 2016: 107) They established two trade institutions, SAPTA and SAFTA; however, these two institutions have not been very successful.

Despite geographical proximity and bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, South Asia has a very weak economic convergence performance; so much so that intra-regional trade only accounts for five percent of the total trade in the region. In recent years, the region's largest economy (India) has tried to expand its trade relations with South Asian countries. New Delhi has taken necessary steps to create an open space consisting of South Asian countries and establish regional cooperation, being the main supporter of forming a free trade area. (Karimi, 2022: 145) Regional economic convergence in South Asia is in recession. Official trade statistics do not reflect the real volume of trade among South Asian countries, and a significant portion of South Asia's intra-regional trade is conducted through unofficial channels, including smuggling networks and third-party countries. The share of intra-regional trade in South Asia compared to extra-regional trade is very insignificant. Tariff and non-tariff barriers have largely prevented the growth of intra-regional trade in South Asia and directed it towards extra-regional resources, and this is more prominent for India and Pakistan than other South Asian countries. (Fateminijad, 2016: 115) Despite bilateral and multilateral agreements, intra-regional trade is limited. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of relative economic advantage in the region, which makes economic complements difficult.

Another major obstacle to intra-regional trade is India's role as the big brother, which has caused divergence and fear among smaller countries. (Karimi, 2022: 147)

Regional economic outlook has been weakened due to the conflict between India and Pakistan, to the extent that Pakistan even avoids having normal trade relations with India. The plans for a South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) and a South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) were established in the region under the umbrella of SAARC and have not been successful so far. (Farrell et al., 2015: 364) The prospect of regional convergence that would impact South Asia has less outlook for economic cooperation; because the economic similarities of South Asian states make them more competitors than complements to each other. (Buzan, 2010: 229) Based on this, SAARC has experienced numerous failures and to solve them, member countries need to try harder. Because the first failure of SAARC was in the field of economy where it experienced very weak convergence and this has various factors:

- ✓ The lack of complementarity of products produced by SAARC members and their trade regimes;
- ✓ Trade being influenced by non-economic bilateral relations instead of areas with relative economic advantages;
- ✓ Tension and lack of trust between India and Pakistan and other countries in the region;
- ✓ Widespread fear and concern among South Asian countries about India's hegemonic role in the region;
- ✓ Lack of political coordination;
- ✓ Dependence on the United States;
- ✓ Complications of using preferential trade policies and failure to achieve SAFTA;
- ✓ Intervention of developing governments in economic affairs;
- ✓ Differences in the size and volume of regional economies;
- ✓ Neglecting differences among members;

- ✓ The larger SAARC members, especially India, refraining from fulfilling their responsibilities to ensure the success of regional convergence and the equal benefits of smaller members;
- ✓ Political differences between ruling groups and opposition in South Asian countries;
- ✓ Convergence with the global order at the expense of regional arrangements. (Fateminiajad, 2016: 104)

#### **4. Political Tensions between India and Pakistan**

India and Pakistan have identified each other as the cause of tension between the two nations. General Katpalia from India sees the psychological origin of the India-Pakistan conflict in Pakistani leaders, emphasizing, "Without a doubt, the problems between India and Pakistan primarily stem from leadership. The leadership of Pakistan has consistently fueled public hatred and suspicion towards the people of India and has used it as a political tool." In fact, Pakistan presents a hostile image of Indian leadership. On the other hand, a significant part of its core ideology is that Muslims cannot trust Hindus, and Pakistanis still believe that India will never be able to accept the subcontinent's partition. Indian rulers are bent on destroying Pakistan. These perceptions have escalated tensions between the two countries. (Hadian and Rigi, 2019: 143) The competition between these two countries, which are important and key members of SAARC, has overshadowed other members and challenged regional convergence. Signs of SAARC's intra-regional dynamics have been created since the SAARC summit held in Islamabad in January 2004. The India-Pakistan conflict even cast its shadow over the possibility of holding this summit because India demanded a complete halt to Islamist groups by Pakistan in Kashmir before any significant bilateral activity based on regional cooperation. In Islamabad, on the sidelines of the SAARC summit, India and Pakistan held a meeting between the prime ministers of both countries, where they emphasized the start of bilateral talks based on trust-building and bilateral cooperation. The dialogue between India and Pakistan continued with Manmohan Singh's gradual integration strategy, and signs of a positive change in direction in India-Pakistan relations, including cooperation in energy between the

two countries, became apparent. Behind this positive change of direction in South Asia, there were dual pressures. One from the people of India and Pakistan and the other from neighboring countries that are tired of the region's ongoing dispute and conflict and gradually declare their support for regional cooperation. (Farrell and colleagues, 2015: 365) In this regard, even the people of India and Pakistan on both sides of the border have recently been nostalgic compared to the past and are eager to maintain close relations with each other, this potential can be used to strengthen regional identity. (Fateminijad, 2016: 106) SAARC encourages the Quadrilateral Growth Forum regional cooperation comprising four countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal). The main pillars of this approach are to exploit potentially natural resources such as water, wood, oil and natural gas, and mineral resources. This sub-regional approach does not allow SAARC to reach its true potential due to political conflict between India and Pakistan. If the presumed concept is attractive, Quadrilateral Growth cannot progress. The reasons for this are both economic and political. Economically, the region has weak infrastructures and needs massive investment. Politically, mutual fear and suspicion always appear in front of participating countries to achieve their goals. (Farrell and colleagues, 2015: 365) The conflicting political identity of SAARC members does not allow an identity based on their common social-cultural heritage to take shape. Therefore, a kind of regional identity is needed for SAARC's success. If member countries seek to weaken regional interests to secure their limited political benefits, it is better to withdraw from this treaty, which merely becomes a place for dialogue. (Fateminijad, 2016: 106) However, if attention is paid to the speeches of SAARC leaders, they have repeated the subject of regional cooperation; but have not offered a solution. If it continues in this way, SAARC has become an opportunity for South Asian country leaders to take a photo.

## 5. Border Disputes

Most member countries have territorial disputes with each other. These border disputes between SAARC treaty countries play a prominent role in shaping relations and interactions among the countries of the region and potentially cause instability and lack of convergence in this region, and at times become a dispute and challenge among these countries. India, one of the members of this treaty, has

border disputes with most other SAARC member countries, and only Afghanistan and Maldives do not have border disputes with India; but what hinders achieving comprehensive solutions in SAARC is these tensions and disputes that exist between the members of this treaty, at the top of which is the dispute between India and Pakistan. In addition to Pakistan, India also has similar disputes with other neighbors such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which can threaten to reach common regional solutions (Farzinia, 1995: 221), which in itself indicates the inefficiency and inactivity of the SAARC treaty.

The most important border disputes among SAARC members include the dispute between India and Pakistan over the sovereignty of Kashmir as the most critical issue. The issue of Kashmir and border disputes between India and Pakistan have been a constant problem for both governments since the establishment and independence of Pakistan and is the source of many tensions in South Asia. The wars and conflicts of 1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999 have created a history of relations between these countries and are still disputed, and the disagreements between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Durand Line. This issue has overshadowed the cooperation between the two countries (Aghajari and Rostamifar, 2012: 27) and has reduced the ground for cooperation among members and increased hostilities.

## **6. Disputes between India and Pakistan**

India and Pakistan are among the largest and most important countries in South Asia. Since the independence of Pakistan from India, the disputes between the two countries continue to this day, and the long-standing enmity between India and Pakistan nullifies any effort and activity to increase agreements on economic cooperation and create regional peace. The most important disputes between India and Pakistan are briefly stated as follows:

A. Security challenges and disputes: South Asia is one of the most crisis-prone regions in the world and faces numerous traditional and new security threats. Border disputes, proliferation of nuclear weapons, ethnic-religious disputes, leftist rebellions associated with global and regional Islamic groups, and climate change, which can turn this region into the poorest region in the world, are among the security threats. Another important issue that has not been addressed is the specific

regional security arrangements that have doubled the problem of security threats (Karimi, 1401: 140). The dispute between India and Pakistan is a prominent feature of South Asia during and after the Cold War. From a social and cultural perspective, the formation of Pakistan is influenced by the tension between a section of Hinduism followers and Islam in India. In the political-security structure of the region, the Kashmir issue is also considered a major disagreement and dispute between the two countries. Pakistan plays a significant role in linking South Asian security and Afghanistan. India also holds an important position in the political, economic, and security fields of the region (Ataee and Jafari, 1397: 163). Pakistanis see Afghanistan's security and stability in contrast to their national security and seek political, military, and economic dependence on themselves (Haq Panah and Rahimi, 1390: 303). The SAARC organization did not have a specific mechanism for managing disputes and has not played a significant role in managing existing disputes in South Asia and preventing their continuation: because South Asian governments lack collective personality and consist of governments that have little commitment to regional principles and standards. In this regard, the need for dispute management through cooperation on everyone is clear; but there is no commitment in this regard. In this case, there is no mechanism in SAARC for resolving disputes, maintaining regional peace and security becomes very difficult, which in turn has an adverse effect on social and economic development in the region (Fateminia, 1395: 104). India and Pakistan's negotiations for achieving peace, security, and regional stability, which are occasionally affected by destructive incidents and events, and everything returns to the starting point, have always been on the permanent agenda of relations between the two countries (Jafari and Gholamali, 1400: 63).

Energy security is another important factor that has made India an active security actor in this region. The dispute between India and Pakistan is a factor that threatens the security of energy transit routes to South Asia. One of the reasons for the non-operation of the TAPI pipeline is this crisis (Karimi, 1401: 147). The security of small states is largely dependent on the pattern of larger states and can only pose a threat to great power when they benefit from the advantages of alliance with larger powers. In South Asia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives, all of which have close geographical and cultural ties with India, can

cause trouble for Delhi by allying with India's rival powers and small states may play a spoiling role in local security (Buzan, 1389: 221).

The issue of mutual security, non-interference, and good neighborliness is a necessity of a regional organization and that no country should be under the influence of another country. The SAARC organization has expressed the issue of security in some of its meetings. Destructive groups cross their sphere of influence to carry out terror in others' territory. Destructive groups, with financial support from a country, sometimes use another's sphere of influence for access, initiating destructive actions and kidnapping to a third country (Delinic and Pandi, 1392: 66). Of course, countries are afraid of such acts and close their borders and such issues seriously weaken regional cooperation and increase distrust.

B- The grounds for competition between India and Pakistan: The geopolitical relations model in South Asia displays the confrontation and face-off of the two major powers in this region (India and Pakistan). Therefore, the main security concerns of South Asia are related to the political and military sectors resulting from the struggle of these two countries. China's support for Pakistan has led to the formation of a direct contradiction model between India and Pakistan. This issue has made India a security activist in the region. This issue has turned the South Asia region into a competition field between India and China, and consequently, the military-political-economic system of the region is heavily influenced by the military-political-economic arrangements of India and China. On one side of these arrangements are the countries of China-Pakistan-Myanmar-Bangladesh and recently Afghanistan, and on the other side are India-Myanmar-Vietnam. However, the type of strategic relations within each of these arrangements is slightly different. (Karimi, 1401: 149)

Before the September 11, 2001 incidents, tension and insecurity were observed in the India-Pakistan region. However, with the US and its allies' attack on Afghanistan and NATO's presence in this country, Afghanistan's membership in SAARC was completed, and the center of gravity of tension and insecurity in the region expanded to the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan axis. Although the relationship between India and Pakistan is a confrontational one. This relationship takes shape when the conflicting interests between the main players have higher importance and sensitivity and to the extent that competition between them has become outside

of international conventions, in such a way that their geopolitical positions against each other have taken on an open aspect based on intimidation and threat (Yazdanpanah and Kamran, 1394: 351).

India's relations with Pakistan are also tense and fragile alongside relations with Afghanistan. The problems of India and Pakistan and the resolution of these disputes are very complicated. In fact, the resolution of disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan is largely dependent on resolving disputes between India and Pakistan. The threat to India from Pakistan has led to control of India's operational sphere in organizing political and economic activities in the subcontinent, especially the SAARC organization, which overall makes the perspective of resolving the Afghanistan-Pakistan dispute unclear (Haq Panah and Rahimi, 1390: 304).

In general, the behavior of India and Pakistan in the success and failure of SAARC is of special importance; because on the one hand, these two countries are the largest and most important countries in South Asia, without whose presence and role, any regional plan is almost worthless. On the other hand, India and Pakistan have marked the fiercest competition in South Asia, and SAARC's positive impact on their behavior can be considered as SAARC's success. For this reason, they have made SAARC a victim of their irreconcilable policies (Fateminia, 1395: 102). That is, these two countries have taken the SAARC organization hostage and made it a victim of their irreconcilable policies.

C- The Kashmir Crisis: The Kashmir crisis is the main issue of dispute between India and Pakistan, and the impact of the Kashmir crisis on the "regional relations" of the Indian subcontinent is a tangible example of a geopolitical crisis that has an unparalleled impact on the security complex of the regional space of the subcontinent, compared to other issues and problems that exist in this region. This dispute is an example of an unresolved conflict that prevents the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan and has led to four major wars between the two countries. In fact, the longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir region has limited relations between the two countries. (Tarabi and Sanei, 1396: 32) This crisis has prevented economic cooperation as a principle of convergence in this region from being realized, and has turned the success of the SAARC organization in envisioning developments in this region into a dream.

Therefore, the Kashmir crisis has not only deprived many people of the Indian subcontinent of development opportunities but also hindered effective regional cooperation in South Asia. (Omid, 1388: 174) To reduce tension and expand intra-regional trade, the Kashmir issue must either be resolved or reduced to a bilateral concern of India and Pakistan and be excluded from the multilateral process. So far, SAARC has failed to resolve the Kashmir crisis, and India and Pakistan, despite all their differences on this issue, have not agreed on a regional agreement. To resolve this crisis, they must give in to a foreign concert. (Leak and colleagues, 1395: 230) With the resolution of the Kashmir crisis, differences between India and Pakistan will develop and help in the convergence process, which will be the main challenge of SAARC. In addition, India and Pakistan are neighbors with complex ideological, historical, and geopolitical problems; in such a way that it is not easy to eliminate or solve these problems and as a result, these issues have had a negative impact on Delhi-Islamabad relations. (Hadian and Rigi, 1398: 142) The confrontation of politicians and rulers of South Asian countries, especially India and Pakistan, in relation to Kashmir and the instrumental use of the crisis and other tension factors to maintain and promote their political position has caused the countries of this region to be delayed in the convergence process. (Omid, 1388: 177) The Kashmir crisis is neither solvable nor possible in the near future; but it is a tension factor in the subcontinent, and other South Asian countries have also suffered from this crisis, and there is no hope for resolving this crisis in the near future.

D- Arms Race: The Kashmir crisis has triggered an alarming arms race in both conventional and unconventional (nuclear) forms between India and Pakistan, imposing exorbitant costs on them. India's access to nuclear energy technology and atomic bombs raised concerns for Pakistan, which decided to acquire this power and deterrent tool by any means possible, even at the cost of starving. India's access to nuclear technology in the 1970s was a significant event, which after India's nuclear tests in 1998 and Pakistan's reciprocal action, served as a political-security shock in the regional and global arena. (Mosafa and Norouzi, 1393: 630) India's then Foreign Minister, Shyam Saran, had said: "It does not seem that India is seeking to proliferate nuclear weapons or that India's cooperation would weaken the nuclear non-proliferation regime." He stated: "India does not want any nuclear-

armed state to emerge, especially in its neighborhood, and we cannot legitimize any concealment related to weapons of mass destruction technology. We believe all states should adhere to their commitments under treaties and international instruments and, in addition, maintain transparency in fulfilling their commitments. (Shafiei and Mandoni, 1389: 136) Another challenge in South Asia is India and Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons. The strategic culture of South Asia is defined by hostility between India and Pakistan. Various factors led India and Pakistan towards nuclear armament. The drivers and causes that pushed India towards a nuclear weapons program are as follows:

- 1- Concern about China's threat, especially after India's defeat in the 1962 war and Beijing's nuclear weapons test in 1964;
- 2- Ensuring regional superiority over Pakistan;
- 3- Elevating India's position at the global level.

The drivers for Pakistan to move towards a nuclear weapons program can be mentioned as follows:

- 1- Pakistan's historical distrust of India;
- 2- Islamabad's fear of New Delhi's nuclear ambitions;
- 3- The India-Pakistan war in 1965 and 1971 and Pakistan's defeat. (Hadipour and colleagues, 1399: 182)

Looking at the future of the SAARC organization, as India and Pakistan are the largest and key members of this organization and the main obstacles in SAARC cooperation are India and Pakistan until a new mechanism is created in developing relations between the two countries; it has complicated all other relations. The arms race in the region has increased tension between India and Pakistan. Both countries are trying to outdo each other. This arms race and astronomical costs occur while both sides are severely struggling with the devastating poverty, disease, and backwardness. (Mansouri, 1389: 204) However, India is growing and developing economically, but Pakistan is suffering severely from economic weakness and is seeking non-refundable loans.

## 7. Structural Situation in South Asia

The imbalanced power of units, political competition, and fear of domination by a powerful actor in the region have negative implications for regionalism. Smaller

and less influential South Asian countries like Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal have had fewer sensitivities; however, the independence process of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh legitimized the India-Pakistan confrontation. This confrontation intensified in the shadow of the Cold War developments. (Mosafa and Norouzi, 1393: 630) South Asia has an imbalanced and asymmetrical power structure. The essence of this imbalance and asymmetry lies in the fact that India is far superior to its neighboring countries in terms of population size, resources, and military power. Although India does not explicitly emphasize this; based on its superior position, it expects its neighbors to recognize its superior status. However, almost all of India's regional neighbors have accepted India's superior position within the region; but what they resist is India's hegemonic dominance in this region. (Delinic and Pandi, 1392: 131) Indians have always tried to dictate policies to Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. On the other hand, the security structure of South Asia has been bipolar for several decades. This continuity stems from the dominance of India and Pakistan over the subcontinent, both of whom are each other's main rivals, and no changes in internal or external affairs in South Asia have occurred that would overturn this pattern. In this state, it can be stated that despite continuous changes around the subcontinent, the relevant structure has remained stable. Internal changes, including the division of Pakistan and external developments, have not disrupted the primary pattern and have even strengthened the existing bipolar state further. (Buzan, 1389: 237)

## **8. Production and Smuggling of Drugs**

Historically, the maritime route of the Indian Ocean, especially the route known as the "Southern Route" which extends from the Makran coast in South Asia to the eastern coasts of Africa, is considered one of the significant routes for the drug trade, especially the smuggling of opium and heroin. So much so that in recent years, the waters of South Asia, especially the Bay of Bengal, have turned into a hub for illegal transportation of chemicals used as raw materials for the production of methamphetamine. There are numerous documents of transporting these substances from South Asia to the ports of Tanzania for use in the domestic and global drug market (Talaei and Javidbakht, 1400: 293). In addition to this, the cultivation of drugs in South Asia has a history of several thousand years, which

has mainly been in the field of medicine in the past. However, drug cultivation is now considered a social issue as it is supplied on the global market. The geographical proximity of the region to the Golden Triangle, which has a historical reputation in the field of drug production and smuggling, has a history of about five decades. The routes of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal have made these routes one of the most ideal maritime routes for drug transportation. The lucrative drug trade has become one of the main ways for criminal networks present in South Asia to generate income. These cargoes are transported by sea in large hidden cargoes on cargo ships or smaller cargoes by fishing boats equipped with fast engines from Sri Lanka to Pakistan or India and from there using maritime routes of the Bay of Bengal to other parts of the world. (Talaie and Javidbakht, 1400: 294)

After the start of drug cultivation in South Asia, the region gained more importance; as it became a center for the production and distribution of drugs. Also, due to instability in Afghanistan, this region has become one of the major centers for arms smuggling. All efforts made by the Afghan government and the international community to cut off the flow of drugs have failed. The reason for this is the misconception that drug production in Afghanistan is a new phenomenon. Misconceptions have led to an increase in drug production and trafficking in Afghanistan. The quickest and most effective way to eradicate and root out drugs on a large scale is to stabilize Afghanistan. (Farajirad and colleagues, 1389: 36) The SAARC organization has not had a notable achievement in eradicating drug cultivation and trafficking. Since the SAARC region - especially Afghanistan - is considered one of the areas of drug cultivation and trafficking, this organization signed the convention on combating drugs and psychotropic substances in 1990. The purpose of signing this convention was to raise awareness among member countries about drug addicts and drug trafficking issues, especially among SAARC youth. (Omid, 1388: 143)

## 9. Widespread Poverty

Given the problems of SAARC member countries, including population growth and low per capita income, the issue of poverty eradication has always been one of SAARC's priorities. Therefore, at the sixth SAARC summit in 1991, an

independent poverty reduction commission was formed to review the state of poverty in the region. The seventh SAARC summit prioritized financial issues such as workers' rights and primary education for all. At the eleventh SAARC summit, more emphasis was placed on cooperation with other regional and international organizations to fight poverty. At this summit, the independent commission presented the issue of poverty reduction under the title "Our Future, Our Responsibility" and formulated activities for poverty eradication in the SAARC organization. (Aghajari and Rostamifar, 1391: 22)

Economic problems and the development crisis are other concerns of SAARC countries. Millions of people in these regions live in poverty. Low income and low quality of life have affected other economic and development indicators. Except for India, the industrial growth of other countries is not in good condition. From the UN perspective, Afghanistan since 1971, Bhutan since 1971, Bangladesh since 1975, and Nepal since 1971 are among the economies with the least development, which is an important economic characteristic for countries and the region; Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are also considered developing and weak economies. (Mosafa and Norouzi, 1393: 631) Despite India's rapid economic growth, it remains backward and hundreds of millions of its citizens live in poverty and about a third of its population live in extreme poverty. (Nay, 1395: 42)

The weakness of health and treatment infrastructures, the employment of a large part of the people in agriculture, fishing, animal husbandry, the weakness of transport infrastructures, the weakness of industry, limited and incomplete trade, and low income can be observed in this region. In this region, infrastructure problems, dependence on energy, uneven urban growth, weak private sector growth, low foreign investment levels, dependence on foreign loans, high political risk in crisis areas are other economic problems of South Asia. In total, these factors have influenced security, economic progress, national development, and regional growth. (Mosafa and Norouzi, 1393: 632) The creation of peace between Islamabad and New Delhi due to bilateral economic cooperation faces serious constraints:

A- The economic benefits of the two sides for each other are less than what could change the overall atmosphere of their relations;

B- In a situation where there is still no non-governmental travel between these two countries, trade cannot be the engine of their relations;

C- Economic ties do not have much political significance domestically in either of these two countries. (Fatemi Nejad, 1392: 129)

In conclusion, one of the most important factors in the divergence of the SAARC region is severe poverty and the incompleteness of the economies of these countries.

## 10. Failure of SAPTA and SAFTA

South Asian countries have tried over the years to regulate their relations in the form of collective trade arrangements, and in this regard, they have designed two, one "SAPTA" and the other "SAFTA", which are briefly reviewed.

A- SAPTA: SAPTA (SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangements) was the first step of South Asian countries in the process of supporting economic convergence. The decision to launch SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangements was made at a meeting of the heads of this organization in New Delhi in May 1995. The main objectives of SAPTA were to develop trade through national economies, provide more job opportunities, and ensure a higher standard of living in the SAARC region. This agreement contained extensive rules for liberalizing intra-regional trade and was considered the first step towards creating a free trade area or customs union or other types of freer trade areas. As a result of negotiations on tariff lines, they have agreed. SAPTA focused exclusively on goods trade. Within the framework of this agreement, member countries would grant each other concessions in terms of tariff, quasi-tariff, and non-tariff measures. However, the most important "weak point" of SAPTA was its actual coverage in terms of guaranteed preferences for preferential trade. In total, they accounted for 15 percent of these countries' imports. Overall, SAPTA member countries did not achieve their goals for various reasons. (Fatemi Nejad, 1395: 109) SAPTA could not play a noticeable role in the regionalization process. However, if member countries are willing to continue it, it can be effective.

B- SAFTA: SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area), given the weakness of SAPTA, South Asian countries have taken steps to strengthen the regionalization process by establishing SAFTA, which has been implemented since January 2006.

SAFTA has a positive impact on the expansion of convergence in the south and the regions affected by it. SAFTA is considered a significant advancement for improving intra-regional trade and project-based cooperation. However, what has been achieved is not enough and there is still a long way to go to become a successful organization. (Delinic and Pandi, 1392: 99) Given the volume of informal trade between the countries of the region and its high costs. So much so that high tariffs and non-tariff barriers lead to the use of illegal trade channels in South Asia, bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements guide illegal trade flows to official channels. In total, there are three different views on South Asian regionalism within the framework of SAFTA.

- 1- The optimistic approach emphasizes that the future of regional convergence within the framework of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement is clear, and its economic achievements, especially for the smaller economies of this region, are very important;
- 2- Pessimists believe that the agreement in question has not had a positive outcome and even has negative implications for welfare and unilateral trade liberalization in the region;
- 3- The middle-of-the-road approach believes that although the potential achievements of this agreement are less than unilateral liberalization; but it cannot ignore its benefits for the smaller countries of the region. (Fatemi Nejad, 1395: 116) There was optimism at first if they continued with the same optimism, they would achieve success. But South Asian countries have sacrificed trade and economy to politics and deprived the people of this region of a prosperous and peaceful life.

## 11. Afghanistan and SAARC

Afghanistan, with its unique strategic position in regional convergence, serves as a gateway between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Western Asia region. One of the initiatives that have been shaped by new policies and acceptability in Afghanistan and the region, in the midst of political agreements inside and outside the region, was to include Afghanistan in SAARC, which requested membership in 2005 and was accepted in April 2007 at the fourteenth meeting. Afghanistan's accession to SAARC at this juncture and under these conditions has increased the

inherent risk of the region and weakened regionalism. Issues such as the lack of national cohesion of Afghan society, instability, and slow economic progress of Afghanistan have made the environment more turbulent. India's and Pakistan's different attitudes towards Afghanistan's position also transfer some of this disharmony to their regionalism process and have advanced SAARC with this weakness, ambiguity, and complexity. (Mosafa and Norouzi, 2014: 639) Most Afghans are unaware of their membership in SAARC, and scientific books and articles by Afghan authors are extremely rare.

For Afghanistan's economic development, more attention must be paid, and Afghanistan should be given a superior status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Regional SAARC centers should be established in Afghanistan, as they have been established in other member countries. To attract tourism, the Afghan government needs to take necessary measures for the growth and development of the tourism industry with promotional activities in places like Bamyan. Also, essential work should be done in safer places, for example, in the northeast of the country. Also, some practical regional solutions should be involved in the Afghan issue. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, which are among the five major peacekeepers of the United Nations and are both members of SAARC and close neighbors of Afghanistan; they should have a special interest in peace and development in Afghanistan. Regional countries have significant interests in Afghanistan's stability. (Balkhi, 2013: 163)

Bamyan province is one of the central provinces of Afghanistan, which was officially selected as the cultural center of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at a festival held in Bamyan in 2015 with the presence of Afghan officials, SAARC officials, and representatives of member countries.

Eight historical monuments of Bamyan have been registered as world cultural heritage in the United Nations Scientific, Cultural, and Educational Organization (UNESCO). The existence of these historical monuments and natural landscapes led the SAARC organization to choose Bamyan as its cultural capital. (Information Day, June 6, 2015) But to what extent Afghanistan has benefited from inclusion in the SAARC organization is somewhat contemplative. However, Afghanistan pays an annual membership fee of \$300,000. However, it can be said that not only

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Afghanistan but all member countries of this organization have been subjected to unpleasant incidents and political tensions between member countries.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In a comprehensive test, the challenges within SAARC are due to suspicion among members of this regional organization that has perpetuated tensions and instability. This suspicion stems from political differences that exist between two key members of this organization and has overshadowed other members, revolving around these two members (India and Pakistan). Intense competitions have led to an arms race that hinders regional cooperation. Also, many unresolved border and maritime disputes remain in the SAARC region. These unresolved conflicts, coupled with drug trafficking problems, have disrupted cooperation relations.

One of the main goals of the SAARC organization is to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life, economic development in the member countries of the SAARC organization, which has not yet achieved this desire, and the reason is tensions between governments in the SAARC region and especially political and economic competitions between India and Pakistan. These crises have hindered regional cooperation in the SAARC region. These challenges have not only had a high negative impact on trade relations; but indirectly they have caused the trade exchanges of these countries to be outside the South Asian region. It has shifted intra-regional trade to extra-regional and the regional trade market has been influenced by the political tastes of favored governments. Ultimately, the internal challenges that exist in the SAARC organization have caused this organization to fail as a successful organization in economic, cultural fields, improving the quality of life, reducing poverty, eliminating tariffs, eradicating drug cultivation and trafficking.

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