

CHINA AS A MEMBER OF SAARC: OBSTACLES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The debate and discourse of admitting the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) as a full member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is not a new phenomenon but for the last decade, it is argued by one school of thought led by Pakistan that to ensure symmetry in South Asia, given a sharp power imbalance in the region and to transform SAARC as a viable regional organization, it is essential to admit China as a full member of SAARC. If the geography, demography, and resources of South Asia are analysed, more than two-thirds belong to India. Hence, India is considered the core of South Asia but China has borders with all South Asian countries except Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. India has around 70 per cent of the population, territory, and resources of South Asia. Therefore, by default occupies a dominant position. There is no other region in the world like South Asia where one country occupies an enormous space and has a history of discord and armed conflicts with its neighbours. This paper examines the case of China's admission in SAARC as a full member and the impediments in this regard.

Key Words: *conflict, cooperation, global warming, SAARC, SCO, CPEC, regional cooperation*

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Introduction

While the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is not a South Asian country in a cultural and historical sense, it borders five out of eight members of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).¹ No country in South Asia is unfamiliar with Chinese investments and trade. In the last three decades, China's economic, commercial, trade, investment, political, security, and military ties with many South Asian countries seem to have reached their peak. Yet, China is culturally and historically not considered as a South Asian country and this argument is used by the opponents of China joining SAARC as a full member.²

The debate and discourse on admitting the PRC as a full member of SAARC is not a new phenomenon but for the last decade, it is argued by one school of thought led by Pakistan that to ensure symmetry in South Asia, given a sharp imbalance in the region, it is essential to admit China as a full member of SAARC. If geography, demography, and resources of South Asia are analysed, more than two-thirds belong to India. Henceforth, India is considered the core of South Asia, which has borders with all the South Asian countries except Afghanistan. Sri Lanka, geographically separated from India by sea, is located in its vicinity. India has around 70 per cent of the population, territory, and resources of South Asia and by default occupies a dominant position. There is no other region in the world like South Asia where one country occupies as enormous a space and has a history of discord and armed conflicts with its neighbours.

In South Asia, China has a conflict only with India and that conflict too is based on claims on each other's territory and has been frozen for long albeit border skirmishes between the two countries in the last few years. Following the 'open door policy' of the former Chinese President Deng Xiao Peng in the late 1970s and early 1980s, China decided not to meddle in the affairs of any country of the world and focus on economic development and progress. As a result of its

strict policy of non-interference and non-intervention in the affairs of its neighbours and by following a policy of 'peaceful coexistence', China managed to emerge as the world's foremost economic power. It is rightly argued that "Chinese neighbourhood diplomacy is increasingly characterized by the multilateral mode as has been witnessed in its deepening of engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and, more recently, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). China is expected to use the same pattern with SAARC as it has used with ASEAN. However, given the complexities in South Asia and ineffectiveness of SAARC as a regional organization, Chinese efforts have been met with frustration."³ India on the other hand, because of its unresolved conflicts with its neighbours, particularly with Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir and its age-old interference in neighbouring countries, is unable to emerge as a great power because, to achieve a regional and global power status, the concerned country must maintain peace with its neighbours.

This paper examines the case of China's admission in SAARC as a full member and responds to the following questions:

1. Is the Chinese case to become a full member of SAARC legitimate and based on merit?
2. Why is India opposing Chinese membership in SAARC?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of China becoming a full member of SAARC?
4. Can SAARC be revitalized if China becomes a full member?

Furthermore, this paper also analyses the potential of China in transforming SAARC from a stagnant to a vibrant regional organisation because of its enormous resources and expertise in preventive diplomacy.

SAARC's Paradoxical Position

SAARC was established as a full-fledged regional organisation when the first summit of South Asia was held in Dhaka, the capital of

Bangladesh, in December 1985. Launched as a result of the vision and initiative of the then President of Bangladesh Zia-ur-Rehman in 1977-78 to promote regional cooperation among the countries of South Asia, SAARC, since its inception has made a difficult journey.⁴ SAARC comprised of seven countries, viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka at the time of its establishment in December 1985. Afghanistan became the eighth member of SAARC in April 2007.

Three major realities about SAARC need to be considered while analysing its performance in the last 36 years. First, inspired by the success of the European Economic Community (EEC), now the European Union (EU), and the Association for South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the countries of South Asia tried to unleash the process of regionalism in the region. Thus, promoting meaningful economic, trade, commercial, travel, cultural, educational, environmental, water, and energy cooperation. The process of regionalism requires free movement of goods, services, capital, and people so that connectivity and minimum restrictions on the flow of people help the region progress and develop.

Even before SAARC was established, several meetings of Foreign Secretaries and Foreign Ministers of South Asian countries were held from 1981 to 1985 in which areas of cooperation among the regional countries ranging from rural development, forestry, civil aviation, tourism, education, and so forth were examined. A lot of paperwork was done before and after the establishment of SAARC to promote regional cooperation in South Asia. The question that arises is that why did SAARC fail to promote meaningful regional cooperation despite so much brainstorming and planning? Unfortunately, trade among SAARC countries is only 5 per cent of the total trade of its members as compared to 60 per cent among the ASEAN and 40 per cent among the EU member countries. Furthermore, the EU for most of its nationals is visa-free and ASEAN has a liberal visa regime for its

members. SAARC has a long way to go as far as easing travel restrictions is concerned. SAARC is also lagging in terms of connectivity, as to a large extent their capitals lack direct flights. Airlines from South Asia particularly of India and Pakistan and Pakistan and Bangladesh do not fly to each other's capitals. If one wishes to fly to Nepal from Pakistan and vice versa, there are no direct flights and one has to fly to Dubai, Muscat, or Doha to reach Karachi or Kathmandu.

It is not only the case of lack of travel, connectivity, and meagre trade among the SAARC countries but also the existing lull in this regional organisation following India's refusal to attend the 19th SAARC summit, which was scheduled to be held in Islamabad in November 2016, that has augmented the SAARC stalemate. Boycotting the SAARC summit creates a wrong precedent. It is not for the first time India has boycotted a SAARC summit. India refused to attend the 1991 Colombo SAARC summit when it sided with Bhutan's argument that its King could not attend the Colombo summit because of domestic reasons. Second, SAARC is often referred to as a hostage to Indo-Pak conflicts and it is rightly said that unless there is a normalisation of relations between the two neighbours, SAARC would continue to suffer. No regional organisation can progress without seeking harmony in its rank and file, which is not the case for SAARC. This is why it is suggested to admit the PRC as a full member of SAARC to strike a balance in this regional cooperation mechanism.

SAARC's predicament is that India is the largest country in South Asia, which takes other members of SAARC for granted. Its only impediment is Pakistan, which resists New Delhi's perceived domination and hegemony in the region. In April 2018, when the Prime Minister of Nepal visited New Delhi, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested that like India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Bhutan, Nepal should also refuse to participate in the 19th SAARC summit which was scheduled to be held in Islamabad in November

2016 but was subverted because India refused to participate on its allegations of cross-border terrorism from Pakistan. Third, when SAARC was established in December 1985, it was rightly thought that discussing bilateral contentious issues might derail the nascent process of regional cooperation in South Asia. Therefore, Article X was inserted in the charter of SAARC, which barred member countries from discussing conflictual bilateral matters under the ambit of this regional organisation. However, 35 years after the formation of SAARC, it is high time that Article X be removed from the charter of SAARC because SAARC has come of age and now it can afford to discuss contentious bilateral issues provided it is done professionally and prudently.

One can illustrate countless reasons for the marginalisation of SAARC *vis-à-vis* other regional organisations and its failure to perform better. Yet some of the reasons like the absence of political will and determination, lack of commitment to take the process of regional cooperation to its logical conclusion, and the absence of dynamic leadership in South Asia contributed to the derailment of the SAARC process. However, much can be done to revitalise SAARC if member states take cognisance of lethal challenges to South Asia like climate change, global warming, poverty, underdevelopment, the rise of extremism, intolerance and violence, and the role of non-state actors who, in connivance with drug mafia, tend to destabilise South Asia. The issues of climate change and global warming alone should be enough to unite the members of SAARC to cope with challenges threatening the future of 1.8 billion people. Certainly, if China is admitted as a full member of SAARC, one can expect this regional organisation to become vibrant and successful in the years to come.

Map of China and South Asia



Source: <https://revolutionaryfrontlines.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/china-map-of-east-asia1.jpg> accessed on 4 March 2021.

China as a Full Member of SAARC

China and South Asia are not distant but immediate neighbours as rightly pointed out by Shahnawaz in the following words:

South Asia and China have much to gain from each other in the present century, especially in light of the developments of the last decade. The emergence of China as an economic power has been noticed by many but not welcomed by all.

Many see it as a challenge to their supremacy but for others, China's economic impact is beneficial. They see it as the centre of a 'virtuous trade cycle' that is helpful to most developing economies in the region. Many South Asian countries, but not all, fall in the second category. China is affecting South Asia both directly and indirectly. Its direct impact can be seen in its emerging role in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), its involvement in the efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and its possible role in bringing SAARC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) closer to each other... The inclusion of China can enhance the scope of SAFTA. When it comes to trade, ASEAN countries are facing tough competition from China in the international market, especially the US and Japan."⁵

According to the charter of SAARC, there should be consensus for admitting a member. Therefore, when Afghanistan applied for membership, given Pakistan's reservations, its case was delayed until consensus was reached. This is not the case with the PRC because it has not yet applied for membership and, perhaps, Beijing is judging the response of the members of SAARC before it formally applies for membership. But one can gauge the situation if China applies as a full member of SAARC. Consequently, "it is obvious that China will not limit itself to observer status. It has already expressed its desire for full membership and has initiated its desire in this regard. Inclusion of China as a member holds promise for a new chapter in the functioning of SAARC as it will neutralize India's hegemonic role."⁶

According to speakers in a conference *South Asia Amidst A New World Order* held in Kathmandu in March 2018, China needs to be considered for admission as a full member of SAARC. According to a news report on the proceedings of the conference, the suggested way out of the structural imbalance in SAARC was to grant full membership to China, which could not materialise because of India's opposition.

The report further stated that China shared borders with at least five of the total eight member states of SAARC.⁷ Therefore, Muntazir Ali rightly argues:

China became an integral part of South Asia's geopolitical and strategic environment, following its takeover of Tibet in the early 1950s. It shares borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bhutan and Nepal. Traditionally, China's external relationships in the region have been built on defense and intelligence ties, military transfers and political support. South Asia holds vital security, diplomatic and economic interests for China. The stability and security of China's two troubled provinces, Tibet and Xinxiang, is inextricably linked to South Asian states. After Russia, China shares its longest border with India — a 4,000 kilometers stretch — which is still unsettled between the two countries.⁸

As Shahnawaz also argues:

The growing influence of China in South Asia is driven by economic, strategic and security imperatives. In order to fuel its growing economy, China requires natural resources such as oil and other essential minerals. Furthermore, it requires new markets for its products. Strategically, China needs to balance India's influence in the region. It appears that China would be more willing to win India's trust through enhanced bilateral trade than encircle it through the 'Strings of Pearls' strategy. China-India collaboration can ensure strategic stability in South Asia and may pave the way forward for a peaceful post-NATO Afghanistan. To counter the 'three evil forces', China requires greater cooperation with South Asian countries.⁹

In 2005, China was granted an observer status in SAARC, whereas, on the occasion of the 18th SAARC summit held in Kathmandu Nepal on 26-27 November 2014, China expressed its

desire to join the regional organisation as a full-fledged member.¹⁰ Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka favour Beijing's aspiration to join SAARC, but India and Bhutan will oppose China's application. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, given the huge Chinese investments and engagements, may remain neutral and not openly oppose the PRC's membership application in SAARC. At the 12th SAARC summit held in Islamabad, the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao sent a message of greetings to the SAARC member countries. It was at this summit that the SAARC leaders agreed to establish a dialogue partnership with other regional bodies and with states.¹¹

Therefore, it is argued that China is keen to become a full member of SAARC. "India rejected the demand saying that the member nations of SAARC first need to deepen their cooperation amongst themselves and later think of extending the membership to observer nations. There are pros and cons of China getting full membership and to add to it, there is the special bond China is known to share with Pakistan, training its armies and providing hidden support to them against India."¹² Those who are suspicious of China's ambition to become a full member of SAARC believe that "China seems to be silently playing its cards to influence the geopolitical environment of South Asia. Silent moves, though, are now growing into powerful voices seeking and demanding full SAARC membership for China."¹³ China entered SAARC as an observer in 2005, supported by most member states. Observer states collaborate with SAARC members on specific initiatives but do not have voting rights. However, as recently as November 2014, during the SAARC summit in Nepal, China expressed its desire of joining the SAARC as a full-member.

Tanvi Madan of the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, in a 2014 report titled *China Role in SAARC*, states:

A number of SAARC countries have reportedly supported full membership for China, including ally Pakistan, as well as

Nepal and Sri Lanka. For the smaller SAARC states, China is a growing economic player in their countries; moreover, having another large Asian state in SAARC presents the possibility of limiting India's influence or playing one off against the other to elicit maximum benefits. India has not been a supporter of full membership for China in SAARC. It has traditionally frowned upon too much external influence in South Asia (though it has worked with other third parties in the region to curb Chinese influence).¹⁴

The report further states:

Those in India who support Chinese membership assert that through geography and its links with SAARC members, China is a "South Asian" country. They note that the region and the Sino-Indian relationship could benefit from Chinese membership. Other analysts state that SAARC is not that relevant any way and thus there would be little harm in including China. Yet others note that China is already engaging with South Asian countries bilaterally in a way that excludes India; this way India could be part of that engagement. Those who oppose Chinese membership, including within the Indian government, question the inclusion of a non-South Asian country. Their concerns include China potentially dominating the organization and working against India interests within it; Sino-Indian political difficulties limiting SAARC's effectiveness and activities, as India-Pakistan ones have done; and Sino-Indian interactions within SAARC exacerbating China-India mistrust.¹⁵

The smaller SAARC states not only see China as a balancing and stabilising factor but also beneficial for trade and investment cooperation.¹⁶ As Ali argues:

There are more prospects than problems of China playing a stabilizing role in South Asia. These prospects are related not only to China's own domestic and regional imperatives but also to South Asia's changing political equation.¹⁷

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also prove China's growing interest in South Asia. As pointed out by Surendar Kumar in his article *China's SAARC Membership: A debate*, China became a SAARC observer member at the Dhaka Summit in 2005, with Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh supporting the move, and India, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives opposing it. Ever since China has made significant progress in terms of its participation in SAARC. The China-South Asia Business Forum, founded in 2004, which primarily focuses on "communication, cooperation, development and mutual benefits has been further strengthened with China's engagement with SAARC. In 2006, the China-South Asia Business Council was established to act as a link between Chinese companies and SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry. From 2007, it has attended the successive SAARC summits; it continues to invite senior diplomats from the region to China; and has hosted the South Asian countries' commodity fair and China-SAARC senior officials' meeting."¹⁸

Three conclusions could be drawn from the above facts: first, small states in South Asia favour China's membership in SAARC because of the obvious reason of balancing India's influence and power in the region. Second, a school of thought in India subscribes to the notion that the PRC should become a full member of SAARC as China is a South Asian country because of its geographical links in the region. Third, in the last two decades, China has strengthened its economic engagements in South Asia by establishing China-South Asia Business Forum and China-South Asia Business Council. As the debate on admitting China as a full member of SAARC continues, one

may ask: is SAARC beneficial for China? To what extent China can gain from its full membership in SAARC?

China is the world's second-largest economic power after the United States and the first in terms of its foreign exchange reserves with a high economic growth rate. Therefore, it is South Asia that needs China and not vice-versa. The following arguments are given in favour of and against China becoming a full member of SAARC.

Arguments in Favour of China Becoming a Full Member of SAARC¹⁹

1. China will be a stabilising force if it joins SAARC and will help mitigate polarisation in this regional organisation particularly between India and Pakistan.
2. China's enormous financial resources may be used for further progress and modernisation of SAARC.
3. SAARC will get an impetus in terms of infrastructure development particularly its railway system and communication networks. China has one of the best railway systems in the world, which it can bring to bear for the modernisation of South Asia.

Arguments Against China Becoming a Full Member of SAARC

1. China is not a South Asian country and does not share its culture, history, and way of life. With such vast societal contradictions between China and South Asia, it is not qualified to become a member of a regional organisation representing South Asia.
2. It is certainly not in the interest of India to support China's membership in SAARC because such a step will undermine New Delhi's influence in the region. Age-old Sino-Pak strategic, security, and military cooperation also tends to deepen India's reservations on China's admission as a full member of SAARC.
3. Since there are reservations from some quarters about Chinese acts in expanding its influence in different parts of the world,

to admit the PRC as a new member will generate new conflicts in the region.

Yet, there are more pros than cons as far as China's full membership of SAARC is concerned. Four major realities exist in terms of SAARC and the issue of the inclusion of China as a full member in that regional organisation:

First, the poor performance of SAARC in mitigating restrictions on the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital proves internal contradictions within South Asia. When one country of South Asia, i.e., India, which happens to possess 77 per cent of the area, population, and resources of the region and has a history of discords with neighbours, the very question of meaningful regional cooperation particularly in terms of people to people contacts, trade, and commerce cannot be ignored. Amid structural contradictions within SAARC, why China, which is the world's economic superpower, be interested in joining such a regional organization? Second, SAARC has failed to put its own house in order. Instead of dealing with challenges professionally, SAARC countries are least mindful that they have been marginalized in the global power structure and the international community doesn't take them seriously.

Third, the lack of seriousness and prudence on the part of SAARC to deal with its fault lines is a major impediment. In an era of globalization, information technology, geo-economics, and soft power, there is a cut-throat competition in seeking a place in the global economy and power structure. As long as the countries of SAARC remain a victim of suspicions, mistrust, ill-will, and paranoia, the region cannot develop and will hardly have a five per cent contribution as far as the world economy is concerned. In global sports, whether summer or winter Olympics, South Asian countries have performed poorly to the extent that no country of the region was able to seek a gold medal. Likewise, in the arena of social and human

development, South Asia is much behind than European Union or ASEAN countries.

Fourth, the economy of China is four times the economies of all the South Asian countries. In its essence, it is to the advantage of South Asia if China becomes a full member of SAARC because, except Japan, no Asian country can match with the modernization, progress, development, resources, and wealth of China. Furthermore, China is also a model for South Asian countries in terms of the rapid pace of modernization as in just one generation time it has been able to pull 500 million people from below the poverty level. Whereas, South Asia has half of the world's poor population and millions of illiterates. Instead of learning lessons from the miracle of China, India which has more than 30 per cent of its population living below the poverty line and 40 per cent illiterates, is perceived to be jealous of Beijing's progress and development. India, because of its opposition and hostility to Pakistan is also opposing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). If India has the capability, capacity, and resources, it should come forward and launch programs for the welfare, progress, development, and modernization of impoverished South Asia of which two-thirds is composed of India.

Finally, a peaceful and stable South Asia is essential for China. China's own experience in its neighbourhood is sufficient to prove the need to adopt a policy of non-interference and non-intervention in the internal affairs of any country. Peace with neighbours enabled China to rapidly progress and develop within only three decades. Therefore, "contemporary Chinese foreign policy is based on lowering tensions with adversaries and trying to create a stable political and strategic environment in the neighbourhood. The most important objective of Chinese diplomacy, in the context of South Asia, is to create a zone of peace within which it can continue its economic development. In South Asia too, as in other regions of Asia, China seeks to use

multilateral regional forums to develop common ground on issues of common concern."²⁰

China has advised both India and Pakistan to resolve their bilateral contentious issues through negotiations and dialogue instead of confrontation. Because, as rightly argued by Beijing, no country can progress and develop when it is consuming its energies in sustained conflicts with other countries. Unfortunately, India and Pakistan have failed to take the advice of the PRC seriously because both lack the courage, boldness, prudence, and wisdom to deal with their contentious issues peacefully. The last country with which China went to war was Vietnam in January 1979 and since then Beijing has not militarily engaged itself with any of its neighbours. As far as the Sino-Indian conflict in the summer of 2017 over a road crossing the territory of India, China and Bhutan at Doklan is concerned, both sides averted an armed conflict and agreed to maintain peace.²¹

Conclusion

China and South Asia are geographically, economically, and strategically connected. If the mountains of the Himalayas are a geographical barrier between China and South Asia, in an era of globalization, information technology, geo-economics, and soft power such impediments do not matter. Yet China and South Asia are geographically contagious. China has modernized its communication linkage with Tibet by laying a railway line to Lhasa. And China is also building a road to the border of Nepal. China already has an all-weather road link with Pakistan called the Karakorum Highway (KKH) operationalized in 1978, KKH is getting another boost through CPEC.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that it is in the interest of South Asia to include China as a full member of SAARC. Yet, Beijing first needs to apply for its membership in SAARC with sound reasons so that when its case is discussed by the SAARC members it will be quite difficult for its opponents to block such a move. India will certainly be isolated if it opposes China's application because it will be

termed as an act of jealousy. Unfortunately, along with India, it is also Bhutan which sides with New Delhi on most of the issues. Bhutan is the only member of SAARC which has no diplomatic relations with the PRC because of the age-old tension between the two neighbours. Therefore, Bhutan needs to amend its policy vis-à-vis China instead of toeing the line of India on almost all regional and international issues.

The visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China and his two-day summit with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan on 27-28 April 2018 was termed as a major event to strengthen ties between the two giant neighbours but there was no such reference in their negotiations on China's admission in SAARC as a full member.²² It seems that China wants to test the intentions of the Indian Prime Minister in reciprocating the gestures from Beijing on peaceful conflict management of its territorial disputes with New Delhi.

China is not in a hurry to get full membership in SAARC as it knows very well that a policy based on patience, prudence, and perseverance can go a long way in seeking desired results. Certainly, the majority of the SAARC members support China's inclusion in SAARC as a full member, a fact which India knows and wants to deal with unreasonably by exerting pressure on various SAARC member countries not to support the case of China in SAARC. As a result, it is SAARC that will lose instead of China because of India's age-old conflicts with Beijing and its fear of China challenging New Delhi's preponderant position in South Asia. The concept that China will act as a buffer in South Asia between the two antagonistic states, i.e., India and Pakistan, is, however, contested. Pakistan's age-old friendship with China is beyond any shadow of doubt and there are apprehensions in New Delhi that Beijing may not remain neutral in case of issues involving India and Pakistan. But because of China's focus on diplomacy and negotiations in a crisis and conflict situation, Beijing

will not tilt in favour of its age-old ally and will advise the two sides to mend fences through a process of dialogue.

In its essence, as things stand, SAARC is in limbo because of the opposition of India, along with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan to participate in the 19th SAARC summit, which was scheduled to be held in Islamabad in November 2016. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his second term transforms his country's policy on attending the 19th SAARC summit amidst tension with Pakistan, one can expect SAARC to come out of the prevailing crisis. The video link conference held in March 2020 under the initiative of the Indian Prime Minister to discuss strategies for dealing with the COVID-19 virus needs to be appreciated along with a fund that has been established to assist victims of the virus. Yet, SAARC has a long way to go to transform itself as a functional organization and China's admission in this regional organization can be a source of great help.

Notes and References

- ¹ China has borders with Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Whereas, Bangladesh is in the geographical proximity of PRC. Maldives and Sri Lanka are island states and located far from China, yet Beijing has enormous influence in the two SAARC member countries.
- ² Moonis Ahmar, "China in SAARC: To What Effect A Pakistani Perspective", *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi), Vol. 35, No. 3, May 2011.
- ³ Muntazir Ali, "China as a factor of stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects" *Pakistan Horizon* (Karachi), Vol. 63, No. 3 (July 2010), 69.
- ⁴ In 1977-78, the then President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rehman visited India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and mooted the idea of Regional Cooperation in South Asia. His idea advocated a regional organization of South Asia modeled like European Economic Community and Association of South East Asian Nations in order to promote trade, commerce and connectivity among the countries of South Asia. In 1981 the first meeting of Foreign Secretaries and in 1983 a meeting of Foreign Ministers of South Asia was held in which the idea of establishing a regional organization was discussed.
- ⁵ Muhammad Shahrukh Shahnawaz, "China and South Asia: Threats, Strategies, Cooperation and Expectations," *Pakistan Horizon* (Karachi), Vol. 64, No. 2 (April 2011), 65.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.
- ⁷ *Daily Mirror*, (Kathmandu) 26 March 2018.
- ⁸ Ali, "China as a factor of stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects," 68.
- ⁹ Shahnawaz, "China and South Asia: Threats, Strategies, Cooperation and Expectations," 77-78.

- ¹⁰ Apart from PRC, observer status in SAARC has been given to the United States, European Union, South Korea, Japan, Myanmar, Iran and Mauritius.
- ¹¹ Fazal-ur-Rahman, "China and SAARC: Envisioning Partnership for Development," *Pakistan Horizon* (Karachi), Vol.64, No. 4, 54.
- ¹² <https://www.careerride.com/view/should-china-be-given-full-membership-at-saarc-18143.aspx>, accessed on 24 April 2018
- ¹³ <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/chinas-pitch-for-saarc-membership-threatens-indias-dominance>, accessed on 24 April 2018.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-role-in-saarc/>, accessed on 22 April 2018.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Rahman, "China and SAARC: Envisioning Partnership for Development," 56.
- ¹⁷ Ali, "China as a factor of stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects," p. 75.
- ¹⁸ Surendra Kumar, "China's SAARC membership: A debate" *China Studies*, Vol 6, No. 3, December 2015, 4. Nevertheless, according to the author, India has hitherto successfully blocked China's attempt to become a full-fledged member of SAARC, on the grounds that SAARC needs to work towards strengthening its ties with new partners, rather than expanding membership.
- ¹⁹ Moonis Ahmar, "Where will South Asia stand in the emerging multipolar world," *South Asia Amidst a New World Order* (Kathmandu: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and COSATT, 2018), 56-57.
- ²⁰ Ali, "China as a factor of stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects," 69.
- ²¹ "Chinese and Indian face off in Bhutan border dispute," *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/06/china-india-bhutan-standoff-disputed-territory>, accessed on 6 June 2019.

- ²² "What was the motive behind Modi's visit to China?" *India Today* (New Delhi), 28 April 2018.