

Lessons from ASEAN for SAARC

What is the issue?

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- Both SAARC and ASEAN took birth with almost similar aspirations.
- While ASEAN celebrates its 50th year, being largely successful, the SAARC has remained stagnated.

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Why has SAARC stagnated?

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- **Cooperation** - The political animosity and military conflict between India and Pakistan have disturbed the regional cooperation.
- This witnessed a new low when India boycotted the 19th SAARC summit in Pakistan, as a result of the Uri terrorist attack.
- Subsequently the summit was cancelled with Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Bhutan following India's stance.
- **Trade** - Trade amongst the SAARC members stands only at 3.5% of their total volume of trade.
- Initiatives under the South Asian Free Trade Association have failed to make much headway.
- Sub-regional initiatives like the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement also have stalled. (Click [here](#) to know why)
- **Connectivity** - The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme allows only certain categories of dignitaries to be exempt from visas.
- Ordinary citizens are excluded from accessing unimpeded travel in the region.

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- Free movement of people between India and Pakistan is not that easy.
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- It is even difficult to a get visa for citizens of other SAARC countries who have visited either India or Pakistan before and now wish to travel to the other.
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- Poor infrastructure in SAARC countries also plagues connectivity.
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What lessons do ASEAN hold for SAARC?

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- **Mandates** - ASEAN, in its first two decades, focussed on a limited range of issues.
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- Only after securing them, it expanded its mandate over time.
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- Resultantly, it now deliberates on varied issues such as climate change, disaster management, counterterrorism, drugs and human trafficking, etc.
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- **Cooperation** - ASEAN was able to ensure its sustainability by amicably resolving the disputes and adopting peaceful mechanisms to mitigate opposing claims.
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- **Trade** - Trade in ASEAN has grown rapidly.
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- It has focussed on promoting rapid economic growth and modernisation.
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- It has created the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) for facilitating trade.
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- This ensures liberalisation and protection of cross-border investments operations, together with best practices for the treatment of foreign investors and investments.
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- **Connectivity** - ASEAN nations are planning to waive entry requirements amongst the member states.
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- A feasibility study has been conducted on the development of a rail link from Singapore to Kunming in southern China.
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- This boosts intraregional trade and people-to-people connectivity.
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- Projects aimed at promoting the entire region as a tourist destination have also been undertaken.
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What lies ahead for SAARC?

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- SAARC countries should avoid building sub-regional ties at the cost of jeopardising the regional vision for unity.
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- E.g. Attempting to isolate Pakistan by forming sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC.
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- Bilateral power struggle and animosity should not come in the way of keeping open the channels of engagement.
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Quick Facts

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SAARC

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- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985.
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- SAARC comprises of eight Member States who are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
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ASEAN

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- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967

in Bangkok, Thailand.

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- It came in with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the founding members namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

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- Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia joined in the course of time.

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ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement

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- ACIA was adopted in 2009 in the context of an integrated economic community.

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- It was envisioned as ASEAN's instrument to create a free and open investment environment to increase global competition and enhance the attractiveness of ASEAN as a single investment destination

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Source: The Hindu

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