

The SAARC Paradox: Why South Asia Fails to Integrate

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Abstract

SAARC is a contradiction in terms for the entire region, with common vulnerabilities but no (real) momentum for unity. This essay explains how vested geopolitical competition and organisational structural inertia have consistently subverted regionalism in the region. Through a digitally-enabled mixed-methods approach, the paper combines quantitative outcome measures of programmes with qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with senior policy-makers. The principal findings are that SAARC is crippled by operational inactivity, largely the result of the India-Pakistan standoff and rigid consensual voting institutions that have forced its members to pursue extraregional alternatives. The paper concludes that SAARC must move to a flexible, multilayered integration model and shift from transactional bilateralism to practical, transformative multilateralism. The paper introduces a novel data-based comparative approach to ASEAN's successful model. It suggests a new kind of issue-oriented, sector-specific cooperation, in addition to modular 'economic corridors,' with which to eventually break out of the region's entrenched developmental stagnation and institutional paralysis/mistrust.

Keywords: Economic corridors, geopolitical rivalry, institutional paralysis, regional integration, SAARC.

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1. Introduction

The SAARC is a tale of shared twin-paradox vulnerabilities amid little on the ground (litany drafts notwithstanding) to tie the member states together. The primary objectives and methodology of SAARC are, in fact, not similar to those of successful models, such as the African Union and ASEAN. On the one hand, geopolitical competition and, on the other, mutual suspicion have hindered the establishment of a regional identity that would encourage tangible projects aimed at reducing the risks of the security dilemma (Imran, 2021, pp. 67-86). Consequently, such a disease leads the organisation into what it calls operational paralysis: where institutions are morbidly inactive, and initiatives fail at a high rate. The intra-political fragmentation

induced by two-level conflict is commonly used to deter resource use and to percolate regional value chains (Liu et al., 2023, pp. 2110-2132).

Such stalemates in the policies push already members toward bilateral or extra-regional solutions, which, at the end of the day, blunt their sense of initiative-based collective action. This leads us to the extremely detrimental impacts of this disintegrated department: the region does not convey a sense of stability and economic attractiveness, which are impossible to achieve through partial market openings and governance effects (Butorina & Borko, 2022, pp. 105–112). Lastly, SAARC is a talk shop and not an institution of action. So long as it remains that way, South Asia will remain vulnerable to regional and extra-regional exploitation and fratricidal

conflicts, with everyday development challenges addressed to no substantial end; that is the impasse.

1.1 Significance of the Paper

This paper is significant because it gives the geopolitical and institutional reasons why SAARC could not rise to the occasion. Using the paradox of unshared vulnerabilities as a foundation, it reveals how enduring rivalries and a race to the bottom in mutual distrust – notably between India and Pakistan - undermine all potential for developing regional value chains (Liu et al., 2023:pp.2110–2132). It is an important report because it does not rely on empty apologies and examines the institutional paralysis and bungled efforts that made all this possible.

It captures the essence of broken governance, leaving member states reliant on non-regional actors within the region, thereby undermining collective regional stability and economic dynamism (Butorina & Borko, 2022, pp. 105–112). The article by An et al. (2023) aims to develop an integrated model for the revitalisation of South Asian regionalism through issue-based flexible cooperation, in light of the abrogation of SAARC, drawing on ASEAN's success stories. Finally, is this output a critical resource for policy-makers and academics interested in addressing the cross-border dimension of climate change and economic volatility in what has historically been a fragmented yet increasingly complex regional geopolitical field?

1.2 Methodology

The impasse of SAARC is presented here by applying mixed methods. First, the level of operational dormancy is measured empirically through programmatic delivery, budget allocation, and implementation, all of which provide evidence to assess its (post) impact. This part can include a comparison with other regional organisations to substantiate claims of institutional slide. The project also has a qualitative thrust, concentrating on the attitudes of senior decision-makers and diplomats; here, semi-structured expert interviews serve as the means to make officials' statements work within a thematic analysis.

This article illustrates how memory and security regimes influence regional politics. Finally, the approach also includes a quantitative measurement of economic and social integration indicators—trade volumes, cross-border investments, or tourist flows—with other regional blocs (e.g., ASEAN). Ultimately, through the synthesis of these disparate data and analyses, this paper systematically examines power

asymmetries and geopolitical contention that paralyse SAARC and drive its members towards piecemeal extra-regional fixes to circumvent institutional blockages (Butorina & Borko, 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

1.3 Conceptual Framework

The theoretical frame to elucidate stagnation within SAARC is derived from a dialectic of common vulnerabilities and geopolitical lock-in. The operational modes of SAARC itself have never been able to emulate the kind of integration that other bodies such as ASEAN and the African Union have achieved, in large part because strategic distrust is so widespread within it (across the board and among its member countries) and so varied. This appears to be due to organisational inertia and low drive in the execution and application of resources (Srivastava, 2015, pp. 6-9).

Moreover, the model also takes internal political disunity and its effects on the depth of regional value chains and on the promotion of fragmented extra-regional ties into consideration (Liu et al., 2023). This step minimises working together and sets up a pattern of other such growing puzzles going unanswered. A result of this is the loss of regional stability. Under such conditions, the economy cannot serve as a means to integrate synergistic effects within a common economic space and governance (Butorina & Borko, 2022). Lastly, the model posits that SAARC, in its Uni-Militarist organisation with minimal shared regional vision, is more of a talking than anacting institution and will fall victim to external pulls or internal pushes.

2 Findings and Discussions

The normative ideals and operational mechanisms of SAARC also differ significantly from those of functional regional integration organisations such as the African Union and ASEAN. Geopolitical competition, as well as a lack of confidence among the member states, has worked against the development of a credible regional identity that would enable such joint projects and, in general, reduce security dilemmas (Imran, 2021, pp. 67-86).

2.1 Quantitative Analysis of SAARC's Activity Trends

This section assesses SAARC's operational dormancy in terms of programme output, budgetary allocations, and initiative implementation, compared with other regional organisations. In this paper, we attempt to produce evidence on the limited impact of SAARC, whether this is due to resource constraints only, poor project

implementation, or both. It will map sites where SAARC has visibly underperformed; it will provide empirical evidence to underpin travelogues of its paralysis; it illustrates the gap between rhetoric and reality, and suggests an evidence-based take on its institutional immobility (Srivastava, 2015, pp. 6-9).

This section evaluates SAARC's functional inaction quantitatively in terms of programmatic output, budget level, and implementation with other regional organisations. Operatively, it provides an empirical illustration of the limited impact of SAARC, whether due to insufficient means or poor implementation, to justify its paralysis. Internal political fragmentation, dramatised by enduring rivalries among members, perpetually blocks capitalisation and labour output. It is why SAARC never achieved a degree of economic integration or free movement that could boost regional growth and the collective ability to address common problems.

As a result, members seek bilateral or extra-regional suppliers, thereby reducing the extent of regional cooperation. In the absence of strong regional frameworks, individual SAARC members have had to turn to bilateral or extra-regional alternatives for what should be collective action on issues of mutual interest – eroding their political incentive for regional cooperation in practice. It points to a crucial paradox in which our collective vulnerabilities further necessitate regional cooperation, yet the political will for it is increasingly absent. The outcome is a fragmented strategy that does not contribute to regional stability and the region's economic capabilities, thereby preventing the combined forces associated with integrated markets and authorities (Butorina & Borko, 2022: pp. 105–112).

2.2 Qualitative Assessment of Member State Perspectives on Stagnation

This section aims to elucidate the perceptions of high-level political functionaries, diplomats, and academicians in SAARC member countries regarding inertia, using responses related to lassitude reconstructed from interviews with them, as well as a thematic analysis of their articulations. The contrasting narratives of Indian and Pakistani leadership offer a window into the influence of national self-interest on foreign policy and regional relationships. The analysis also exposes political views and historical backstabbing that are preventing collaboration, but there are too many hanging numbers in SAARC beyond stats.

This analysis also shows how competing visions of the region lead to states' support for regional initiatives, or their unwillingness to engage, and how domestic unrest or foreign policy doctrines square this circle. It further analyses how the contemporary global geopolitical landscape has impacted SAARC members' strategic calculations and integration pledges. It tests the proposition that the lack of a shared regional vision and competing national interests have made SAARC, in practice, a talk shop (rather than an organisation) for collective action. This perspective will offer important identity-related specifics of strategic culture in South Asia and how history and religion may help shape the behaviour of nations (Özkan, 2021, pp. 1–13).

2.3 Economic and Social Indicators of Limited Regional Integration

The level of economic and social integration among SAARC member states in their interactions with other regional groupings can be gauged from this section. It will examine how the partial integration of liberalisation and free movement, not only of individuals but also of ideas, circulate within ASEAN modernisation (Fardhiyanti & Wee, 2022, pp. 43–59).

This section also addresses the economic inefficiencies resulting from the lack of robust regional value chains and associated infrastructure, and how an expanded market would otherwise redound to competitiveness. Furthermore, the research will examine external economic inducements to intra-regional economic linkages as part of re-imagining SAARC, such as China's expanding presence and investment in South Asia, and how these new relations either support or challenge the founding principles of this regional grouping (Liu et al., 2023, pp. 2110-2132).

The perspectives of the global economy have their effects on the regional economic setting – these are compounded by and bring about the favour on national interests rather than multilateral integration as a nation-state – encounter global issues such as super inflation, he is now living under this (Jui et al., 2024, pp. 1-14). This results in a vicious circle in which the lack of regional support will increase individuals' exposure, thereby lowering the collective buffer against global economic shocks.

3. Identification of Key Factors Contributing to SAARC's Paralysis

This paper reviews that political and socio-economic issues have served as impediments to SAARC's growth,

focusing on institution-building and the development of structural contradictions, such as tension points in bilateral conflicts between India and smaller member states, whose relations.

3.1 Geopolitical Rivalries and Bilateral Tensions Among Member States

There is a lack of cooperation in the SAARC region due to historical animosities, particularly between India and Pakistan, where member states prioritise defence over development (Ali et al., 2014, pp. 1120-1129). The absence of a standard security architecture and bilateral issues have been obstacles to the congruence of foreign policy and regional cooperation. Nonetheless, political mistrust continues to hinder the development of a strong regional logistics supply chain supported by economic cooperation (Pretorius et al., 2022, pp. 1-12). This legacy of division still deeply informs many attitudes and helps shape distinct geopolitical bets that preclude a regional policy grounded in the same set of problems.

Historical narratives and security dilemmas have led to centuries of mistrust, compelling states to prioritise national over regional security. This can undermine cooperation in confronting common dangers, such as global climate change (Vereshchak et al., 2022, pp. 30–40). Extra-regional actors use this subversion to destroy SAARC, diluting its coherence and commonality. Those external alliances reinforce a hinterland strategy rather than an integrated security calculus, as in ASEAN. Hampered by regional discord, SAARC is unlikely to develop strong subsystem mechanisms for conflict management and collective security owing to divergent strategic cultures and dissonant historical threat perceptions that preclude regional agreement on security measures.

3.2 Lack of Political Will and Leadership Commitment

This article examines how continued absorption with the absence of political will prevented SAARC's progress, as Heads evidently thought in terms of national interests rather than regional development. This fear of the loss of sovereignty prevents real integration. Furthermore, high turnover in the business of government translates into episodic foreign policy prioritisation, very little continuity, and long-term strategic foresight regarding workable regional engagements (Monyake, 2020, pp. 181-198).

Meanwhile, the SAARC remains trapped in a “nationally self-righteous bilateral syndrome” that promotes a transactional rather than transformational regionalism. This stalemate is mainly due to institutional drift,

widespread corruption, and the absence of continuous, high-quality leadership. The region has thus become and remains trapped in a dubious cycle of mistrust, such that enterprises of cooperation are challenging to initiate and even more difficult to cement (Chizema et al., 2025, pp. 1-14). However, poor financial commitment and a lack of bureaucratic support have kept it underperforming (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020, pp. 1-10).

Provincial rivalries have superseded regional binding strategies, leaving the subcontinent vulnerable to outside inroads and internal fragmentation. As SAARC lacks an effective conflict-resolution mechanism, bilateral conflicts arise between member states, tarnishing the organisation's credibility and depriving it of significant resources vital for development. This is partly explained by ASEAN's lack of paralysis, due to a longer-term political will to build a viable political-security community (Chairil et al., 2023, pp. 263-284).

Protectionism and competition trade interventions are also supported by significant economic disparities, due to which credible FTA they do not materialise. These successes in integration range from organisations such as ASEAN, where countries at different levels of development can integrate into a single internal market (An et al., 2023, pp. 658-666). While ASEAN has made strides in regulatory harmonisation for trans-state e-commerce and financial safety (Fathari & Efendy, 2023, pp. 90–102), SAARC has encountered difficulty managing the economic imbalance between India and its smaller peer states over creating a shared strategy for their economy (Nguyen, 2025, pp. 1–19). Given these institutional obstacles and political stasis, regionalism in South Asia needs to move forward together. Hence, policy coordination is required to relax the activity- and growth-constraining obstacles. They fare well only in the face of existential threats of a general kind, like climate change and terrorism, and, now, future pandemics, when they act together.

3.3 Institutional Weaknesses and Decision-Making Bottlenecks

SAARC's institutional design, particularly its consensus approach, significantly undermines its effectiveness and prevents it from addressing important regional concerns. Unlike the rather makeshift “ASEAN minus X” strategy of ASEAN members prepared to proceed without any member(s), SAARC's rule-by-consensus opens it up to being paralysed by a single member (An, Esteban et al., 2023, pp. 658-666). This adaptive policy is a practical way for ASEAN to move forward in market integration

and harmonisation, where universal agreement among the member states is unfeasible (Sinaga et al., 2025, pp. 1-19).

This institutional flexibility of ASEAN, with variable-geometry mechanisms, contrasts sharply with SAARC, which has little such structural flexibility and operates on a consensus mode, and as a consequence tends to be paralysed despite bilateral differences among members, even at the historical level. It is in the crucible of this duality of decision-making that SAARC has been crippled from taking action to resolve inter-state problems and, thereby, lost legitimacy/rationality as a regional institution.

The inflexible arrangements of SAARC are also compounded by a lacklustre secretariat that is not entirely independent of its members and cannot launch projects or mediate in conflict resolution, as functional regional organisations do. This gap paralysed SAARC and contained meaningful, action-oriented engagement by members in the region, enabling continued organisational impasse, ineffective Policy Decision-making and concerted action against cross-border issues as part of a known ASEAN (with a Secretariat).

3.4 External Influences and Competing Regional Blocs

SAARC and systemic checks on regional cooperation in South Asia: A two-level game of strategic play within. In contrast, silo thinking is preparing the way for a disease of transactions rather than transformation. Arguably, the institutional shambles, corruption, and political tension within national institutions give rise to cynicism toward multinational agreements (Chizema et al., 2025, pp. 1-14). Furthermore, the DSD is encumbered by weak political direction, under-resourcing, and a lack of bureaucratic support, symbolising low institutional capacity (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020, pp. 1-10).

This split is a barrier to countries working together on common global threats such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics. Lacking effective mechanisms to resolve conflicts and flimsy crisis management, member states are now more likely to develop unilateral friction than to engage in multilateral dialogue, which has eroded trust in the organisation and drawn its attention away from development. Lessons from ASEAN: On the other hand, the ASEAN experience also demonstrates that, with strong political will and leadership, meaningful integration can be achieved (Chairil et al.). With SAARC-sealed economies and differing economic levels (An et al., 2023, pp. 658-666), ASEAN has made good

use of the AFAT to standardise markets, eliminate legal differences, and nurture growth (Fathari & Efendy, 2023, pp. 90-102).

Nguyen (2025) contends that India is not developing a shared economic vision with its neighbours; thus, intra-regional investments are constrained. Despite these significant failures, the urgency of South Asian regionalism is, if anything, more acute, given shared socio-economic problems, weaknesses, and dependencies. The focus on integrated approaches needs to be turned decisively towards collective autonomy and whole-of-security policies, in order to disentangle the economic fragmentation of recent decades from political paralysis. While emulating ASEAN's emphasis on regulatory harmonisation, SAARC could, at last, leverage its potential to address the sub-region's urgent developmental needs and enhance its global standing.

4. Discussion

This section will explain the complex predicament and constraints, resulting in very little regionalism taking off in South Asia due to the lack of progress within SAARC. Moreover, the structural challenges and internal/external adversaries to SAARC's progress, i.e., its weak institutional structure and independent economic trajectory, are also explored. It encompasses the history of local political rivalries. The dialogue debates whether SAARC has made its place viable for promoting economic co-operation and regional peace, amid non-consensus and ongoing bilateral wars.

4.1 The Stagnation and Institutional Weakness of SAARC

Its rhetorical aspirations are nothing but neorealism in action, especially in the intra-regional trade comparison with other regional groupings. Relatively intractable non-tariff barriers and lackadaisical political support darken the horizon of regional free-trade pacts, leaving value-chain building and cross-border investment as the poor cousins. Differing economic policies contribute to ongoing business disputes among its members, hampering its progress in both trade liberalisation and regional security (Obasaju et al., 2021, pp. 1-12).

Regulatory uncertainty and inadequate investment in transport infrastructure are urgent barriers to regional integration, which is a critical element in overcoming exclusion. Unlike its counterparts, such as the EU and ASEAN, SAARC has no legal framework or funding pool. This segmentation gives rise to one of interlocked,

but not properly resourced regions, such as the NEI, simply due to its fragmented nature (Ziipao, 2020, pp. 208–223). Meanwhile, economically balkanised and lacking convergence and integration, the region is unable to exploit its strengths at a global scale.

SAARC is a weakly institutionalised body, and this has reflected in its functioning, with piecemeal actions rather than coordinated responses (Nubong, 2021, pp. 123–138). There was no way to enforce agreements or verify promises, and native guarantees were not honoured. These failures of governance present obstacles to essential leadership as the context of global technologies and trade dynamics continues to change (Cigna et al.). The absence of private-sector and civil-society engagement in decision-making becomes a barrier to innovation, whilst reliance on intergovernmental consensus leads to stagnation at the expense of sustainable development in South Asia.

4.2 Implications for Regional Cooperation and Development in South Asia

SAARC, in its comatose condition, is sabotaging the peace, prosperity and security of South Asia; it is creating resource deprivation and squandering opportunities for mutually beneficial economic arrangements (leave aside cooperation to solve common problems: poverty, climate change and terrorism). The lack of such strong regional mechanisms compels members to seek relations elsewhere, reducing the degree of solidarity among them—disconnected policy—drawing interference from the outside (Liu et al., 2023, pp. 2110–2132). Increased reliance on exogenous linkages makes the region less resilient, more challenging to devise coherent development strategies, and accentuates vulnerability and impedes a unified response to shared risks, thereby impacting sustainable development (Pericoli & Donelli, 2023; pp. 53–65).

It challenges regional solidarity and people's solutions to other problems, including climate change, poverty, and hunger. It also fosters dependence on external assistance, thereby diverting attention from cooperation and peace in the region. Competition among states effectively prevents SAARC from addressing development and security challenges in the region, undermining its international image and its role in articulating the interests of member states.

4.3 Theoretical Frameworks and Pathways for SAARC Renewal

This fact of SAARC's paralysis can be discussed within the framework of regionalism theory, focusing on the

neo-functional and intergovernmental dimensions. Neo-functionalism theorises that sectoral cooperation leads to 'spillover' effects, but this is not happening in SAARC due to political considerations and the impact of globalisation on state sovereignty (Wakhungu et al., 2021: pp. 134–154). Barriers to integration include differences and historical baggage driven by national interests rather than regional interests. It asks whether SAARC's dilemmas are genuinely rooted in its 'inherent' structural deficiencies, or if, instead, they are geopolitical mishaps, further dichotomising the atrophic institution and short-term spillovers. If hostilities are not buried, SAARC, as such, may be required to be restructured.

Recognising these constraints is essential for exploring potential other social solidarities in the development challenges of South Asia. Renewal could come from flexible, multitrack integration and task-based cooperation; "modular" initiatives such as economic corridors that gradually foster trust, through infrastructure, say. These measures can potentially ameliorate politicised obstacles to unity by encouraging selective cooperation, albeit not absolute homogeneity, and allowing for national interests and sovereignty (Moyo, 2020). Bringing the deadlock to a close can serve as a model of cooperation and achieve something tangible.

4.4 Addressing Internal and External Challenges to SAARC's Efficacy

The paper further analyses why SAARC did not go further and pushes into discussion its internal and external perspectives on such reasons, alongside geopolitics, bilateral politics, and domestic-level pressures. It downplays the fate of India-Pakistan and the external powers' role in holding back regional cooperation, concentrating on political structures, institutions, and economic disparities that cause discord among member states.

It also considers how global economic re-orientation and new world political configurations could shape the economic and security agenda of SAARC, the role of non-state actors and transnational issues such as terrorism or climate change in increasing conflict or encouraging cooperation. Policy suggestions will be made taking into account the experiences of successful regional organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Azizi, 2024; pp. 111–129).

This comparison will bring out the best practices in institutional design and conflict resolution that can be applied, as appropriate, to South Asia, making it more genuinely regional. In this sense, its modalities will have to be restructured to better accommodate the diversity among member states in terms of trajectories and alignments (geopolitical) through a flexible multi-speed model of integration. It would enable groups of members to deepen integration across sectors while others come on board later, avoiding paralysis from the demand for unanimous agreement.

5. Future Prospects and Pathways for South Asian Integration

In this section, the paper examines such revamp strategies ranging from sectoral partnerships to institutional overhauls in response to geopolitical pivots and domestic imperatives. It raises doubts about the efficiency of SAARC's existing structure and examines decentralised, networked cooperation as well as alternative regional architectures involving non-state actors for bottom-up integration.

This article explores China's implications for South Asian integration, examining whether it promotes or undermines regional projects. It is based on the experiences of ASEAN and BRICS, which have adapted to geoeconomics and increased integration. The RIC can be used to stabilise the region and revive SAARC itself. The shifting of India's stance toward Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and the RCEP's dithering would also carry significant implications for the future economic integration architecture of South Asia, necessitating re-imagining the extent to which SAARC will remain driven by the closest principles entailing trade liberalisation and connectivity in South Asia.

6. Future Perspectives

SAARC will need to re-design/modernise cooperation, taking into account national autonomy, economic disparities and geopolitical competition. That is the uncomfortable bit we are going to have to grapple with if we want any security: choosing to protect ourselves from big global problems like climate change and pandemics. The project is concerned with the region-wide connections and economic entanglements that flow from a trailer behind these external initiatives (e.g., the Chinese 'Belt and Road'), which also create openings for co-operation but pose threats of debt, risk, and web-

based vulnerability to great-power politics. Reactions from major powers, such as US investments in the Indo-Pacific through the Quad, are also complicating regional dynamics that may affect SAARC processes (Paik & Park, 2020, pp. 36-52).

The great game in South Asia is such that one has to manage external influences to generate greater stability in the region. It is not possible without complex diplomacy and a reconceptualisation of non-alignment to maintain a sense of regional freedom. New security predicaments, as characterised by the AUKUS agreement in Southeast Asia, indicate that SAARC should create an effective instrument to cope with security challenges posed by external alliances and shifts in regional identities (Umar & Santoso, 2023, pp. 435–453). The apparent internal/external factors of SAARC require some reconsideration of its working processes and principles.

The following sections will discuss notable cases of SAARC's institutional sclerosis and consider possible changes (while comparing notes with more successful regional institutions). The importance of regional volumes adapted to address new threats, including climate change and pandemics that cross national boundaries and require coordinated responses, will be highlighted here (Prantl & Goh, 2022, pp. 443–469).

7. Conclusion

The SAARC is an economic potential waiting to be unleashed, held hostage by unresolved geopolitical wrangles centred on the fault line between India and Pakistan, which favours national security over regional progress. The findings of the present study suggest that serious inaction occurs, but it is driven by a lack of decision-making rather than by strategic administration. Unlike the flexible ASEAN model, SAARC has no strategic finesse and no secretariat of its own to cut bilateral tensions and build interdependence. Hence, member states show the organisation little respect and opt instead to pursue ad hoc and extra-regional engagements that undercut regional solidarity. This paralysis has left the region ill-prepared for climate change and economic vulnerabilities. In the paper, a multi-speed flexible integration system is suggested as a way to move beyond this impasse, as are modular economic corridors and issue-based cooption through joint venture cooperation to rebuild confidence. As we transition from transactional bilateralism to transformational multilateralism, we will witness the

future of South Asian regionalism. Policy coherence and harmonisation of development visions are needed to realise the region's economic potential. Institutional commitment is necessary for this reform.

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