

Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Problems and Prospects

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The 21st century is a century of integration wherein man-made barriers were shattered. The significant trend of recent international relations is the trend towards regionalism. This is driven by the urgency of channelling national resources to provide a sense of protection in a divided and war-threatened world. At the same time, the necessity for regional cooperation was felt in view of the pulls and pressures exerted on nations to drive together in contemporary phase of world politics. The objective of regional cooperation is to enhance each member state's security, economic growth and cultural harmonization. Prior to the 1950s and the 1960s, most of the Asian region was a single entity and after the end of colonialism in this region it was divided into multiple sovereign states. This new arrangement has resulted in creating tariff barriers, slow progress in intra-regional trade, continuous armed conflicts and negligible cross-cultural cooperation. But after the formation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and dawning of the global financial crisis, and continuous onslaught of natural calamities of epic proportions, such as Tsunami and earthquakes in the region high growth in South Asia cannot be sustained without better management of natural disasters and regional public goods. Benefits of regional cooperation in water and climate change would be immense in South Asia. From the Himalayas, where glacier melt is already changing water flows in ways that remain to be understood, to the coastal floodplains of Bangladesh and Pakistan, South Asian countries need to adapt to climate change. South Asia needs to strengthen regional governance institutions. This is vital for managing the provision of regional public goods, and management of common pool resources. Regional cooperation initiatives could unlock the growth benefit of South Asia's geography and people, consistent with improved management of regional public goods. Better regional cooperation can also contribute to reducing regional conflicts, which will remove an important long-term constraint to growth. Further, to acquire better bargaining powers vis-à-vis in world forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO), where they face steep competition from other regional blocs like the European Union (EU), the South Asian nations have to make an attempt to rise above their mutual differences and cooperate at the regional-level to have effective solutions to these problems. In the light of above, this paper discusses South Asian regionalism with its future prospects followed by its current issues and opportunities.

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