



The Conflicting Consequences of Afghanistan's Membership in SAARC (2007–2021): A Critical Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges

Mohammad Musa Sadeqi

Assistant Professor of International Relations Department at Khatam al- Nabieen University, Kabul,
Afghanistan

E-mail: musa.sadeqi26@gmail.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v13i3.7448>

Abstract

This study examines the conflicting consequences of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC. The main research question is what opportunities Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has provided for the country's political, economic, and cultural development during the years 2007-2021 and what challenges it has created. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the theory of liberal institutionalism, and the research method is descriptive-analytical, relying on documentary data and structural analysis of regional relations. The findings show that Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has, on the one hand, promoted regional legitimacy, expanded multilateral diplomacy, and increased cultural and educational cooperation. On the other hand, geopolitical competition between India and Pakistan, the development gap between members, and the weakness of Afghanistan's internal economic structure have prevented the realization of sustainable development. In the economic sphere, convergence has been formed asymmetrically, and Afghanistan has become a regional consumer market rather than benefiting from export benefits. On the other hand, cultural and educational cooperation is considered one of the most sustainable achievements of membership. The study concludes that Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has a dual and conflicting nature and that the realization of its interests depends on domestic capacity, political stability, and intelligent management of regional relations.

Keywords: *Regionalism; Regional Integration; India-Pakistan Rivalry; Economic Dependence; South Asia; Afghanistan*

Introduction

Regionalism is a process in which political units cooperate within the framework of a common institution and take action to achieve common goals and confront common threats. By becoming members of regional institutions, countries can not only strengthen economic, political and cultural cooperation, but also provide a basis for reducing historical conflicts and promoting regional diplomacy. Simultaneously with the end of the Cold War and the dominance of the multipolar system over the international system, regionalism in South Asia also began with the formation of the "South Asian

Association for Regional Cooperation" or "SAARC". This organization was established in 1985 with the presence of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives to provide a framework for interaction among member countries and promote political, economic and social integration in this tense region. According to the SAARC charter, the philosophy behind the creation of this organization has been primarily economic, and political goals are the organization's next priorities. The most important objectives of the founders of SAARC, according to the Charter of the organization, can be listed as follows (Charter of the SAARC, 1985: article1):

- 1) To promote the welfare of the people of the South Asian region and improve their quality of life;
- 2) To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to create opportunities for a decent life and full utilization of the potentialities for all;
- 3) To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia;
- 4) To contribute to mutual trust and understanding of each other's problems;
- 5) To promote active cooperation and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields;
- 6) To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- 7) To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interest;
- 8) To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar goals and objectives.

With the above objectives in mind, Afghanistan also officially became a member of that organization in 2007; an event that is considered an attempt to overcome geopolitical isolation, develop relations with neighboring countries, and participate in regional processes from the perspective of this country's foreign policy. By becoming a member of the South Asian Regional Cooperation Organization, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was determined to save itself from geographical isolation and play a positive role in regional and global developments. This membership occurred at a time when Afghanistan was facing numerous security challenges, weak economic structures, and fragile political institutions. Membership in SAARC allowed Afghanistan to participate in regional dialogues with rival and partner countries while benefiting from economic and cultural opportunities. At the same time, this membership exposed the country to geopolitical competition and economic restrictions. In the framework of international relations theories, including James Rosen's theory (1971), the foreign policy of small and underdeveloped countries is more affected by the international system. In other words, these countries are forced to behave as the major global powers want. Accordingly, Afghanistan's foreign and security policy in the years after 2001 was heavily influenced by the foreign policy of the United States of America and major regional players. On the one hand, the presence of the United States in this country paved the way for Afghanistan to enter regional institutions, including the SAARC organization, and on the other hand, it faced the country with new challenges. Given the tense nature of the South Asian region, Afghanistan's integration into the security system of this region has a dual nature: it is both an opportunity and a challenge. During the years 2007-2021, Afghanistan's membership in the SAARC organization has brought significant positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, this membership provided the possibility of Afghanistan's participation in multilateral political dialogues, the development of trade and economic cooperation, and the promotion of cultural and educational exchanges; on the other hand, it created political, security, economic, and cultural challenges for this country; Challenges such as the country becoming a competitive arena between India and Pakistan, economic dependence on regional countries, and socio-cultural limitations. The aim of this article is to critically analyze the consequences of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC. The main question of the

article is what opportunities Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has provided for the country's political, economic, and cultural development during the years 2007-2021, and what challenges it has created. The main hypothesis of the article is that regionalism in South Asia and Afghanistan's membership in SAARC have been a dual, conflicting process: while it has created capacities for cooperation and convergence, it has also had significant negative consequences. Using a descriptive-analytical approach and documentary data, official reports of the Afghan government and SAARC, and other sources, this article attempts to identify the opportunities and challenges of membership, while presenting a realistic picture of the performance of regional institutions in South Asia.

Research Literature

There have been numerous studies on the subject of regionalism. Sean Breslin and Richard Highgate (2003) in their article "New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy: A Conceptual Understanding in Historical Perspective" examined the historical context and global developments of regionalism. In this article, they show that the study of regionalism has been formed in two main waves: the first wave began in the 1950s and continued as a sub-discipline of international relations, focusing on political and security aspects. The second wave emerged in the 1980s and 1990s within the framework of the globalization of the economy and international politics, emphasizing economic, institutional, and social aspects. This article emphasizes that the analysis of regionalism without considering the historical context and its interaction with the global economy is incomplete, and that it is necessary to pay attention to the institutional and political opportunities and limitations of countries; an issue that is of particular importance for examining Afghanistan's membership in the SAARC organization. Another important source in the analysis of regionalism is the book "Regionalism in World Politics: Past and Present" by Louise Fawcett (2004). This book examines the history and developments of regionalism in international politics and explains the difference between traditional regionalism and modern regionalism well. Fawcett emphasizes that regionalism is not only a political and security tool, but also a complex economic and institutional phenomenon that is formed within the framework of globalization. This work is also important in analyzing the opportunities and challenges of Afghanistan's membership in the SAARC organization as a theoretical framework. The article "Regionalism in a Multilateral World" by Wilfred J. Attier (1998) is also an important theoretical source on regionalism. In this work, he examines how regionalism is formed within the framework of globalization and the multilateral international system. According to the author, in a multilateral world, countries try to use regional mechanisms to strengthen their economic and political advantages. This study analyzes the interaction between countries in regional institutions and the challenges arising from competition and dependence and can be of particular importance for this research. An article titled "Institutional Regionalism in South Asia: Evaluating the Effectiveness of SAARC, SEPTA, and SAFTA" by Seyyed Ahmad Fatemi-nejad (2015) is also noteworthy. In this article, he examines the effectiveness of SAARC and the agreements "SEPTA" and "SAFTA" and considers their role in the large countries of the South Asian region (Hindu-Pakistan) to be weak, but among the small countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and Maldives) to be prominent. According to the author, while the large powers of SAARC such as India and Pakistan are dissatisfied with the functioning of the organization, the small powers of the region evaluate its performance positively. According to the leaders of these countries, the SAARC organization has at least been able to play a positive role as a larger address for presenting the demands and raising the voices of small countries.

Another article in this area is "South Asian Developments; Results and Consequences" by Tayyaba Vaezi (2017). She examines the most important positive and negative developments in South Asia and lists their effects on Iran. Since this article focuses on developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it

cannot encompass the subject of the present study. One of the most useful articles in this area is an article by Saeed Vosouqi et al. (2014) entitled “Explanation of Afghanistan’s Position as the Center of Several Regional Subsystems with Emphasis on the South Asian Region and the Role of India.” The authors of the article believe that Afghanistan is politically, security-wise, economically, culturally, and geopolitically a subset of several regional systems, including Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, but for various reasons, including India’s foreign policy, the country has been absorbed into the South Asian regional security system. Although the authors of the article have explained the factors affecting Afghanistan’s absorption in the South Asian region well, they have not stated its positive or negative effects for Afghanistan. For this reason, the present study is of considerable importance and necessity. Despite extensive studies on regionalism and the role of regional institutions in South Asia, few studies have analytically and critically stated the conflicting effects of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC in the period 2007-2021. This research gap indicates the need for the present study and provides the main motivation for a detailed examination of the consequences of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC.

3. Theoretical Discussions

The study of Afghanistan’s membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can be analyzed within the framework of the theory of “liberal institutionalism”. Liberal institutionalists believe that although states are the main actors in the international system, international organizations and institutions can also play a decisive role in reducing conflicts, increasing cooperation, and facilitating interactions between states. (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 1998: 597; Sarraf Yazdi and Sabri, 2012: 69). This view is in contrast to realists who believe that the anarchic structure of the international system severely limits cooperation between states and that international organizations have little impact. Liberal institutionalism is based on the principle that international organizations can strengthen the incentive of states to cooperate by creating transparency, reducing the cost of interactions, and determining property rights (Barkin, 2014: 67-68). In other words, these organizations enable effective cooperation and regional convergence by providing accurate information, establishing standard rules, and monitoring the implementation of international agreements. Global experience, including the functioning of the United Nations Security Council and the World Trade Organization, are examples of the effective role of international institutions in reducing tensions and facilitating cooperation. However, the experience of SAARC shows that in South Asia, the actual functioning of regional institutions is limited and the organization’s ability to facilitate cooperation and convergence is less than expected. Nevertheless, Afghanistan’s membership in this organization is an example that shows that even a small country with many economic and political constraints can benefit from membership in regional institutions. But at the same time, serious challenges and limitations may also come in the way of that country. This experience demonstrates the dual and contradictory nature of institution-based regionalism, which on the one hand provides opportunities such as promoting multilateral diplomacy, increasing economic and cultural exchanges, and participating in regional dialogues; and on the other hand, structural constraints, India-Pakistan rivalry, and weak institutional performance create negative consequences for Afghanistan. (Tajik, 1301; Ziaei, 2018: 79). Thus, the liberal institutionalist framework provides the opportunity to analyze the positive and negative consequences of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC (2007-2021) and shows that although regional institutions increase the capacity for cooperation and integration, institutional and geopolitical constraints and obstacles can also simultaneously reduce its effectiveness. This analysis is the theoretical basis of the present study and determines the path for a detailed examination of the opportunities and challenges of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC.

Opportunities arising from Afghanistan's membership in SAARC

Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has created numerous opportunities for Afghanistan: political, economic, and socio-cultural opportunities. Creating a basis for constructive political dialogue between rival powers, increasing trade and economic cooperation, and scientific and cultural exchanges

are some of the opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC. 4-1. Political opportunities Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has provided significant opportunities for this country since 2007. These opportunities can be analyzed at three levels: 1) Creating an institutional platform for dialogue and management of regional conflicts: One of the important functions of international organizations is to create opportunities and grounds for dialogue between member countries. Accordingly, one of the most important political opportunities for Afghanistan's membership in SAARC is to provide a formal and informal platform for dialogue between conflicting countries in the region. According to the SAARC Charter, one of the basic objectives of this organization is to strengthen cooperation among member states in the field of international issues and to reach an understanding through negotiation in cases of disagreement. (Aghajari; Rostamifar, 2012: 18; Charter of the SAARC, 1985, article1). Although the SAARC organization was initially formed with the aim of strengthening economic and trade cooperation, it has also taken steps to resolve political challenges among member states. In most SAARC summits, the issue of terrorism and the fight against it is a central issue (Taghizadeh Ansari, 2008-2009: 91). In practice, this organization has also become a space for managing security challenges. Based on the theoretical framework of liberal institutionalism, the function of the SAARC organization in creating a space for dialogue between conflicting countries is actually the same as “reducing the cost of interaction” and “increasing transparency” as proposed by Mr. Barkin (2014); This means that even if the organization cannot directly resolve the conflict, it reduces the possibility of misunderstanding and escalation of the crisis by providing a space for dialogue. The SAARC organization has informally provided the possibility of sideline meetings between the leaders of the member states; meetings that have sometimes had more practical results than official meetings (Fateminijad, 2015: 102). This function is of particular importance for Afghanistan, because Kabul could interact directly with the leaders of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka without heavy diplomatic costs. 2) Strengthening security cooperation and institutionalized fight against terrorism: For Afghanistan, which has been facing a serious threat of terrorism since 2001, the legal and security frameworks of SAARC were considered an important opportunity. Two important documents in this regard are: - The SAARC Regional Convention on the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism (1987); - Additional Protocol to the SAARC Convention on Combating Terrorism (2004). Afghanistan signed these documents in 2006 and, based on Articles 7 and 8, committed to exchanging information, intelligence cooperation, and combating the financing of terrorism. (Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2010). The SAARC Interior Ministers' Meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan in 2016 can also be analyzed in this framework. At this meeting, “combating terrorism and drug trafficking, expanding relations between SAARC member states, investigating criminal offenses and cyber or internet threats” were discussed, and decisions were made to confront the above challenges (Bukhdi News Agency, 2016). In the framework of liberal institutionalism, this cooperation is an example of “solving the problem of collective action” because terrorism is a transnational threat and cannot be controlled without regional cooperation regimes. Membership in SAARC for Afghanistan means leaving the Security isolation and entering a network of multilateral cooperation to counter terrorist threats. 3) Enhancing regional status and strengthening bilateral relations with regional powers: From a political and geopolitical perspective, membership in SAARC was considered a tool for “increasing relative power” for Afghanistan. According to Fatemi Nejad (2015: 103), SAARC enhances the power of small countries and enhances their position in the region and the world. This issue had three important consequences for Afghanistan: - Relative exit from the geopolitical margin: Afghanistan officially established itself in the South Asian security subsystem with its membership in SAARC (Vosoughi et al., 2014). This membership strengthened Afghanistan's regional identity and elevated it from the status of a “buffer country” to “official membership of a regional organization.” - Deepening relations with India: One of the most important political consequences was the development of strategic relations with India. The Afghanistan-India Strategic Cooperation Agreement (2011) emphasizes security, training, and equipment

cooperation (Rahmani, 2012: 204). This could help the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in confronting internal instability and combating terrorism, because the threat of terrorism in India and Afghanistan is serious and will remain serious (Spenta, 2018). For this reason, the two countries have always considered terrorism a common threat to both sides and have emphasized a serious and fundamental fight against it: “Terrorism poses the greatest threat to the security of the region and beyond. The two countries want all forms of support for terrorism, including state support for terrorism, to be stopped immediately, and the safe havens and sanctuaries of terrorists that pose a threat to Afghanistan to be closed... The two countries have committed to expanding their cooperation in the security sector. New Delhi pledged to provide more assistance to strengthen Afghanistan’s defense and security institutions so that Afghan forces can effectively combat terrorism, organized crime, smuggling, and money laundering” (Tolo News, 2017).

According to the Afghanistan-India Strategic Agreement, “The parties agree to initiate strategic dialogues to establish a framework for cooperation in the field of national security.... Security cooperation between the parties shall be carried out with the aim of strengthening joint and separate efforts in the fight against international terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering and other crimes. India, based on mutual understanding, agrees to cooperate in the fields of training, equipment and capacity building programs for the Afghan National Security Forces” (Rahmani, 2012: 204). Therefore, in an institutional analysis, SAARC has acted as a “bridge of communication”; even if it has not been able to bring India and Pakistan closer together, it has linked each of them separately to small countries. - Expanding relations with other South Asian countries: Membership in SAARC has led to the development of Afghanistan’s relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. These interactions have been not only political, but also educational and diplomatic. For a country that was rebuilding its international standing after 2001, these achievements were of both symbolic and practical importance. Thus, although SAARC has had limited success in resolving major regional conflicts, particularly the India-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions, from the perspective of liberal institutionalism, its main function can be seen as “creating a platform for interaction,” “reducing diplomatic costs,” “increasing security transparency,” and “strengthening the bargaining power of small states.” However, these opportunities have in some cases also led to conflicting outcomes due to geopolitical rivalries.

Economic Opportunities

One of the most important aspects of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC is its economic implications. Institutional regionalism in South Asia has attempted to strengthen economic cooperation among members by establishing mechanisms such as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) and regional financial institutions. The South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) was signed in 2004 and entered into force in 2006. This agreement is one of the most important legal documents within the framework of SAARC economic cooperation. Its main objective is to establish a free trade area “to promote and strengthen mutual trade and economic cooperation” among member states through the exchange of trade concessions (SAFTA, 2004: 2). From a theoretical perspective, this agreement is an example of economic regionalism in the second wave of regionalism, which emphasizes gradual trade liberalization, tariff coordination, and strengthening economic integration. However, statistics show that intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts for only 5% of total South Asian trade (Kathuria, 2018, p. 28). The weakness of intra-regional trade in South Asia indicates that CEFTA has faced political and structural obstacles in practice. The SAARC Development Fund was also established as a financial institution under the umbrella of the South Asian Organization for Regional Cooperation in 2008. It is considered the most important operational mechanism for achieving the economic and social goals of the organization. The Fund officially began its activities in April 2010 with the establishment of its secretariat in Thimphu, Bhutan, and its mission is defined as “promoting regional integration and economic cooperation through financing joint projects among member countries” (sdfsec.nd). In pursuit of

economic cooperation, trade facilitation, promotion of prosperity, mutual assistance and poverty alleviation, the member countries agreed at the 9th Summit to also address political issues for the promotion of peace and stability. (Najwa, 2014) In the theoretical framework of liberal institutionalism, these mechanisms are an example of governments' efforts to solve the "collective action problem" by reducing trade barriers, increasing transparency, and reducing the costs of economic interaction. For Afghanistan, whose economy was in the reconstruction phase after 2001, membership in such a regional economic regime was considered an important opportunity. The economic opportunities of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC can be analyzed in three axes: 1) Attracting capital and economic assistance from India: One of the most important economic consequences of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC is the deepening of economic relations with India. India is considered one of the largest regional donors to Afghanistan. India is the fifth largest economic donor to Afghanistan after the United States, Britain, Germany, and Japan. In 2008, India allocated \$450 million for development projects in Afghanistan at the 15th SAARC summit, compared to \$750 million previously. Of course, assistance to economic and educational projects did not end there. In fact, with more than two billion dollars in aid for economic development, it can be said that India is one of the countries that has provided the most assistance for the development of Afghanistan. (Zahirinejad, 2018: 91-92) Key projects that India has completed in Afghanistan include: - Construction of the strategic Zaranj-Dalaram highway; - Construction of the Salma Dam (Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam); - New Afghan Parliament building; - Participation in the TAPI gas pipeline project; - Transmission of electricity from Uzbekistan to Kabul (Sajjadi, 2018: 368; Darasoof, 2015). These collaborations show that membership in a regional organization can create "institutional trust-building" and pave the way for long-term investment. Even though SAARC has not directly provided this aid, it has created a platform for continuous and formal interaction between leaders. From a political economy perspective, this cooperation also helped Afghanistan reduce some of its dependence on Western aid and benefit from a strategic regional partner. 2) Reducing transit dependence on Pakistan: One of the most important structural challenges of Afghanistan's economy is its landlockedness and transit dependence on Pakistan. In this context, membership in South Asian regional mechanisms strengthened the possibility of bargaining and diversifying trade routes. Two important steps were taken in this direction:

- Development of Chabahar Port: India has created an alternative route for Afghanistan to access open waters by investing in Iran's Chabahar Port. This project has allowed Afghanistan to export and import its goods without passing through Pakistani territory.
- Creation of Afghanistan-India Air Corridor: The Kabul-Delhi Air Corridor was inaugurated in 2017 and facilitated the export of Afghan agricultural products. These measures are an example of the role of regional organizations in creating interaction and increasing economic and trade relations.

3) Regional Trade Legal Frameworks: SAARC has tried to prepare trade and economic legal frameworks in the process of its activities. In this regard, two agreements are noteworthy: - South Asian Free Trade Agreement: Afghanistan joined this agreement in 2011, which aimed to reduce trade tariffs and facilitate intra-regional trade. Although the volume of intra-regional trade in South Asia remains low (about 5% of the region's total trade), it has created a legal framework for Afghanistan to access the 1.8 billion-person South Asian market. - Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement: In 2010, the APTA Agreement (APTTA, 2010) was signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This agreement demonstrates that Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian subsystem has made it a key player in the economies of Central and South Asia. However, it should be noted that many of these opportunities have not been fully realized due to India-Pakistan rivalry and the structural weakness of the SAARC organization. This has paved the way for conflicting outcomes.

Cultural Opportunities

One of the successful and effective areas of cooperation among South Asian countries is the cultural field. These opportunities not only facilitate the exchange of knowledge and technology among member countries, but also help create regional identity and strengthen social ties. From the perspective of liberal institutionalism, international institutions such as SAARC can help increase informal

interactions, information exchange, and mutual trust among member countries by creating organizational structures. These features are more visible in the cultural field than in other areas. 1) South Asian University: The member countries of the SAARC organization have established the South Asian University so that students from member countries can study together. This university began its activities in 2010 and has so far achieved significant success in improving the quality of higher education in the region by attracting qualified students from all member countries (sau, 2019). From the perspective of institution-based regionalism, the South Asian University is an example of a “regional educational institution” that increases recognition and trust between countries and paves the way for long-term cooperation. The presence of Afghan students in regional universities, in addition to improving the academic level, creates a social, cultural and professional network between countries, which can also lead to strengthening political and economic cooperation in the future. This university, by offering joint courses and research projects, helps transfer knowledge and technology and create regional human capital. 2) Scholarships between member countries: Another cultural opportunity is the granting of scholarships. Every year, Afghanistan receives about 500 scholarships from India (IANS, 2025), more than 1,000 scholarships from Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2025), and a number of scholarships from Bangladesh. These programs have provided Afghan students with the opportunity to study in prestigious fields and universities in the region. Student exchange between South Asian countries, in addition to increasing knowledge and practical skills, leads to the formation of human networks and trust between countries. From the perspective of liberal institutionalism, educational and educational programs lead to an increase in “positive interdependence.” Scholarship students can become cultural and scientific bridges between Afghanistan and their host countries. This process also helps to enhance Afghanistan’s capabilities in the field of regional project management and practical policy-making and can play an effective role in reducing long-term political tensions. 3) Cultural exchanges and the establishment of cultural centers: By establishing various cultural programs and introducing the center of Bamyan province as the “SAARC Cultural Center” in 2015, SAARC has shown that cultural cooperation can help strengthen regional identity (Salam Watandar, 2015). Based on this program, cultural festivals, art workshops and educational programs are held at the regional level. These activities lead to mutual cultural recognition and reduce prejudices among member countries, and pave the way for long-term peace and cooperation. Liberal institutionalism believes that increasing trust and transparency in international interactions strengthens the capacity for political and economic cooperation. Cultural exchanges have exactly this function. Introducing the center of Bamyan province as a cultural center, in addition to creating a regional identity, will enhance Afghanistan's position in South Asia and give the country the opportunity to play a more active role in cultural and social projects in the region. Therefore, cultural cooperation is a successful example of the positive impact of Afghanistan's membership in the SAARC organization and shows that even if there are limitations in the political and economic spheres, regional institutions can have a tangible and long-term impact in the fields of culture and education.

Challenges of Afghanistan’s Membership in SAARC

Along with political, economic, and cultural opportunities, Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC has also been accompanied by structural and geopolitical challenges. Regionalism in South Asia, unlike the European experience, has been shaped by unresolved security rivalries and historical distrust. In such an environment, the membership of a fragile country like Afghanistan can also be threatening. The main challenges can be examined in three broad areas.

A). The - country becoming an arena of geopolitical competition between India and Pakistan One of the most serious consequences of Afghanistan’s membership in the South Asian structure is its placement at the center of strategic competition between India and Pakistan. This competition, which has its roots in the division of the subcontinent in 1947, has acquired more complex security dimensions in Afghanistan.

1) Pakistan's security logic: In Islamabad's strategic calculations, Afghanistan is considered Pakistan's strategic depth against India. The increase in India's influence in Afghanistan is viewed as a direct threat by Pakistani security institutions. India has great influence in South Asia. Meanwhile, that country is particularly popular among Afghans. The growing influence of India in Afghanistan is not at all acceptable to the Pakistani military; for this reason, the Pakistani government is always trying to prevent the influence and expansion of Indian policies in Afghanistan. "India has established its supremacy in South Asia and General Musharraf openly expressed his desire for Pakistan to have an equal position with India; but India is vulnerable in terms of security in Afghanistan. The Pakistani army wants to defeat India in Afghanistan in a proxy war like the Soviet Union. In Pakistan's strategic calculations, this is quite achievable." (Rasuli, 2017, p. 194)

2) Securitization of the regional cooperation space: Within the theoretical framework of "securitization", any economic or cultural cooperation between Afghanistan and India can be redefined in Pakistan's security discourse. This situation causes Afghanistan to be seen not as an independent member of SAARC, but as a variable in the Indo-Pakistani competition. According to the theory of realism, states in an anarchic regional environment are always seeking a balance of power (Qasimi, 2012: 50). Pakistan considers Afghanistan to be part of its "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India. Therefore, any expansion of Kabul-Delhi relations is interpreted not as ordinary economic cooperation, but as a change in the security balance. According to the Pakistani military, the goal of India's alliance with Afghanistan is to change the balance in favor of India and create a threat to Pakistan's interests. According to Rasool Bakhsh Raees, a Pakistani scholar, "a new cooperation between the two states will trigger a new round of the great regional game in which Pakistan will absolutely feel insecure as India's foothold in Afghanistan strengthens" (Fier, 2017, p. 193). In contrast, India has tried to establish its regional influence by investing economically and culturally in Afghanistan. The result of this situation is that Afghanistan becomes a field of competition, not an "independent regional actor."

3) Practical consequence (proxy war): Given the above issues, Afghanistan has unfortunately become a proxy battlefield for India and Pakistan. This situation shows that the South Asian region suffers from the problem of "security trust deficit". In such a situation, a regional institution is unable to contain the competition of major powers and the weaker country like Afghanistan bears the most vulnerability. Therefore, Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has unintentionally exposed it to geopolitical competition; a competition whose security costs for Kabul have been much higher than the institutional benefits.

B) Economic weakness and increasing dependency The second profound challenge is the asymmetric nature of the South Asian economy. In the theoretical framework of dependency, when weak economies enter a free trade area with larger economies, without complementary support policies, the likelihood of becoming a consumer market increases. After 2001, Afghanistan had an economy dependent on foreign aid, extensive imports, and limited production (Samim, 2025). In contrast, India has a diversified industrial economy and Pakistan has a large manufacturing capacity in the field of consumer goods. In such circumstances, trade liberalization in the form of "SAFTA" could bring the following results: - Increase in cheaper imports from regional countries; - Decrease in the competitiveness of domestic nascent industries; - Deepening of the trade deficit; - Increased currency dependence. The problem here is that regionalism leads to development when members have a similar relative level of development (such as the experience of the European Union). But in South Asia, the development gap is deep (Niaz & Shad, 2023, p.89). As a result, instead of balanced convergence, "asymmetric convergence" is formed. In practice, Afghanistan has been more of an importer of manufactured goods from regional countries than an exporter. This situation reproduces the pattern of "peripheral dependence"; that is, a country that is a consumer market for regional goods, but has a limited share in the regional value chain. In such a framework, membership in SAARC without an active industrial policy could lead to a weakening of national production capacity.

C) Changing consumption patterns and erosion of domestic production capacity

The third challenge is the socio-economic dimension of regionalism that has received less attention: the intensification of the culture of consumerism. The Afghan market has been heavily dependent on imported goods for the past two decades (Niyazi; Arshad, 2018). When the domestic market is exposed to a flood of foreign goods, several structural changes occur: - Domestic producers are unable to compete on price; - Consumers are attracted to foreign brands; - Domestic capital is diverted to imported trade instead of productive investment. This cycle leads to “the dominance of the logic of consumption over the logic of production” (Majidi, 201); a situation that is very dangerous in fragile economies. This leads to increased unemployment, reduced motivation for industrial entrepreneurship, sustained dependence on imports, and a continuous outflow of foreign currency from the country. In this case, membership in a regional institution, rather than stimulating industrial development, helps to stabilize the imported trade economic model. Therefore, Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC is neither a threat nor an opportunity; rather, it has created a “dual structure” whose benefits depend on intelligent domestic management, economic diversification, and balancing relations with India and Pakistan. This is precisely the point that makes sense of the concept of “conflicting consequences of Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC.”

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the conflicting consequences of Afghanistan’s membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) during the period 2007-2021 and sought to answer the fundamental question of what opportunities and challenges Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC has provided for the country’s political, economic, and cultural development during the years 2007-2021. The findings of the study show that Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC has been a complex and multi-layered experience that has simultaneously provided significant opportunities and brought serious challenges. In the political and security dimension, membership in SAARC has distanced Afghanistan from the geopolitical periphery and has been recognized as a formal part of the South Asian regional subsystem. Presence in the summits, ministers, and specialized mechanisms of this organization has provided Kabul with a form of regional legitimacy and the possibility of multilateral diplomacy. However, the security structure of South Asia, which is heavily influenced by the historical rivalry between India and Pakistan, has prevented this institutional capacity from leading to sustainable convergence. Afghanistan has in practice become a variable in the geopolitical competition between these two regional powers in many cases, which has increased its security vulnerability. From this perspective, membership in SAARC has simultaneously enhanced Afghanistan’s diplomatic status and heightened security sensitivities. In the economic sphere, Afghanistan’s membership in regional arrangements such as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement and the benefit of institutions such as the South Asian Development Fund have provided opportunities for access to regional markets, attraction of development finance, and participation in joint projects. However, due to the deep development gap between Afghanistan and the major economies of the region, the process of economic integration has taken an asymmetrical form. Rather than being able to utilize its export capacity, Afghanistan has become a consumer market for other member countries’ manufactured goods. This situation has increased the risk of weakening nascent industries, exacerbating the trade deficit, and reproducing structural dependence. Therefore, in the economic dimension, Afghanistan’s membership in SAARC has had a dual nature: a potential opportunity for regional integration alongside constraints stemming from the weakness of the domestic production structure. In the cultural and social dimension, educational, academic and scientific exchanges are considered to be the most successful manifestations of Afghanistan’s membership. These collaborations have promoted human capital and strengthened soft ties between South Asian societies. Unlike the political sphere, cultural cooperation has been less affected by geopolitical competition and has enjoyed relative stability over this period. This shows that the soft dimensions of cooperation can

continue even in conditions of political tension and strengthen the social foundations of convergence. Based on these findings, the main hypothesis of the study, which stated that Afghanistan's membership in SAARC has conflicting consequences and has simultaneously created development opportunities and structural challenges, is confirmed. At all three levels examined, a dual pattern was observed: regional legitimacy alongside security vulnerability, market access alongside trade dependence, and strengthening human capital alongside internal structural constraints. These results indicate that the Afghan experience cannot be evaluated in terms of absolute success or failure; rather, it should be considered an example of incomplete and asymmetrical regionalism in the developing world. In the final answer to the main question, it can be said that Afghanistan's membership in SAARC during the years 2001-2021 was able to stabilize the country within the institutional framework of South Asia and provided capacities for economic and cultural cooperation, but due to the unstable security structure of the region, the competition of major powers, and the weakness of domestic economic foundations, these capacities did not translate into sustainable and balanced integration. As a result, the achievements of membership remained largely conditional and vulnerable rather than deep and sustainable. In general, the experience of Afghanistan shows that regionalism in environments with deep security distrust and a wide development gap, without domestic reforms and intelligent foreign policy management, cannot alone be a driver of sustainable development. Membership in regional institutions creates opportunities, but exploiting them depends on domestic capacity, political stability, and the ability to balance geopolitical interests.

References

- Aghajari, Mohammad Javad; Rostamifar, Simin Sadat (Winter 2012).
- The SAARC Agreement and its Impact on Regionalism. *Political Science Quarterly: International Relations*, No. 20. 2)
- Barkin, Samuel J. (2014). *International Organizations; Theories and Institutions*. Translated by Mostafa Entezar-ol-Mahdi and Abdul Majid Seifi. Tehran: Kavir Publications. 3)
- Tajik, Mehdi. (2012). Liberalism, Aftab Site, August 22, 2012, Retrieved: 10/4/2019. 4) Taghizadeh Ansari, Mustafa (2008 and 2009). South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and its Role in Developing Regional Cooperation. *Free Legal Research Quarterly*: No. 4 5)
- Bukhdi News Agency. (2016, August 17, 2016). The 7th meeting of the Interior Ministers of the SAARC member countries was held in Islamabad. Retrieved from: <https://www.bokhdinewsagency.com/blog/2016/08/07/> 6)
- Darreh Sufi, Sayed Muzaffar (2015, February 13). Afghanistan and India, a sustainable model of friendship. Available at: <https://www.avapress.com/fa/news/122215>, retrieved: 10/5/1398. 7)
- Dehghani Firuzabadi, Sayed Jalal (Fall 1377). Neoliberal institutionalism theory and international cooperation. *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. Year 12. Issue 3. 8)
- Rahmani, Aqila Narges. (2012). After isolation; Afghanistan's foreign policy after the Taliban. Kabul: Kabul Center for Strategic Studies. 9)
- Rasuli, Yasin (Fall 1396). Seventy years of Afghan idealism versus the realism of the Pakistani military. *Contemporary Thought Quarterly*: Year 3, Issue 9. 10)

- Spanta, Rangin Dadfar (2018, November 21). India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: An Unfulfilled Promise. Available at: https://aiss.af/persian/aiss/news_details/opinions/5c1c713406e92, Retrieved: 15/5/1398. 11) Sajjadi, Abdul Qayyum (2018). Afghanistan's Foreign Policy. Kabul: Khatam-un-Nabiyyin University Press. 12)
- Salam Watandar. (2015). Archive of materials Retrieved March 3, 2026, from <http://www.swn.af/archive/13>)
- Sarraf Yazdi, Gholam Reza; Sabri, Mohsen (2012). International Organizations and Theories of International Relations. Tehran: Qoms Publications. 14)
- Samim, M. (2025). Afghanistan; Global Aid and the Role of the United States. Tala'at Rooz Newspaper.. Retrieved March3,2026, from <https://www.etalatroz.com/221408/> 153 Ziaei, Mohsen (June 2018). The Role and Performance of International Organizations in Ensuring Global Peace. Journal of Nations Research. Volume 3. Issue 30. 16)
- Tolo News, Afghanistan and India Agree to Expand Security Cooperation, September 21, 2017, available at: <https://www.tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan>, Retrieved: 10/5/2019. 17)
- Zahirinejad, Mahnaz; Zahirinejad, Mehdi. (2018). Change in Indian Foreign Policy. Tehran: Strategic Studies Research Institute Publications. 18)
- Fatemejad, Seyed Ahmad (Winter 2015). Institution-Based Regionalism in South Asia: Evaluating the Effectiveness of SAARC, CETA and CEFTA. Quarterly Journal of Political and International Issues: Issue 44. 19)
- Feier, Carol Christian. (2017). Battle to the Last Breath; The Pakistani Army's War Strategy. Translated by Khalid Khosrow. Kabul: Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies Publications. 20)
- Ghasemi, Farhad. (2012). Principles of International Relations. Tehran: Mizan Publications. 21) Majidi, A.M. (2018). The Rapid Growth of Consumerism in Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan Daily. Retrieved March 3, 2026, from http://dailyafghanistan.com/opinion_detail.php?post_id=144746 22) Najwa, Khalid (2014, August 8). SAARC; From Imagination to Reality. Mandegardai Newspaper. Available at: <https://mandegardaily.com>, Retrieved: 20/5/1398. 23)
- Niazi, Niaz Mohammad; Arshad, Najibullah. (2012). Study of factors affecting the demand for imported consumer goods in Afghanistan (2002–2006). Kateb Scientific Research Quarterly, Year 5, No. 8 and 9. 24)
- Vaezi, Tayyaba. (2017). South Asian movements: results and consequences. Political Science Quarterly: National Security Observatory: No. 71. pp. 47-52. 258
- Vosouqi, Saeed; Ehsan Fallahi and Qurban Ali Haidari (Fall 2014). Explaining the position of Afghanistan as a regional multi-subsystem center with emphasis on the South Asian region and the role of India, Central Asia and Caucasus Quarterly, No. 87. 26)
- Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (June 2010). Agreement to supplement the SAARC Regional Convention on the Elimination of Terrorism. Kabul: Publication of the Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 27)

- Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (July 2010). SAARC Regional Agreement on the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism of the Member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Kabul: Publication of the Ministry of Justice of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
- Breslin, S., & Higgott, R. (2000). *New regionalism(s) in the global political economy: Conceptual understanding in historical perspective*. *International Affairs*, 76(3), 459–474. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00196>
- Ethier, W. J. (1998). REGIONALISM IN A MULTILATERAL WORLD. Nota di Lavoro, No. 31.1998, Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM), Milano. <https://www.feem.it>
- Fawcett, L. (2004). *Regionalism in world politics: Past and present*. Oxford University Press.
- Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Commerce. (2010). AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN TRANSIT TRADE AGREEMENT (APTTA). <https://www.commerce.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/pdf/APTTA.pdf>
- IANAS. (2025, September 3). INDIA ANNOUNCES 1,000 ONLINE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR AFGHAN STUDENTS UNDER SPECIAL SCHEME. THE ECONOMIC TIMES – EDUCATION. Retrieved March 3, 2026, from https://education.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/india-announces-1000-online-scholarships-for-afghan-students-under-special-scheme/123664217?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Kathuria, S. (Ed.). (2018). A GLASS HALF FULL: THE PROMISE OF REGIONAL TRADE IN SOUTH ASIA (World Bank Report) (p. 28). World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/152371555521055792/pdf/A-Glass-Half-Full-The-Promise-of-Regional-Trade-in-South-Asia.pdf>
- Niaz, M. T., & Shad, M. R. (2023). DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA: LESSONS FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION. MARGALLA PAPERS, 27(2), 85–101. p. 89.
- SAARC Development Fund. (n.d.). HOME. <https://www.sdfsec.org/>
- Siddiqui, N. (2025, July 5). GOVT TO GIVE AWAY 4,500 SCHOLARSHIPS TO STUDENTS FROM AFGHANISTAN. BUSINESS RECORDER. Retrieved March 3, 2026, from https://www.brecorder.com/news/40371192/govt-to-give-away-4500-scholarships-to-students-from-afghanistan?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. (2004). *Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)*. SAARC Secretariat. <https://saarc-sec.org/legal-instruments>
- South Asian University. (2019). RESULT OF PAPER-BASED TEST (PBT). Retrieved March 3, 2026, from <http://www.sau.int/result2019/pbt.php>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).