

## Nepal in the SAARC Framework: Promoting Sovereignty and National Security

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### Abstract

Nepal's involvement in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) significantly shapes its foreign policy decisions, affecting its sovereignty and national security. This article thoroughly explores Nepal's role in SAARC, considering its history, current importance, and future implications. Using research methods backed by real evidence, it carefully examines how ideas like sovereignty and national security play out within SAARC, focusing on Nepal's stance and actions amidst changing regional circumstances. Through a detailed review of existing studies and relevant examples, the article identifies gaps in understanding and proposes research questions to fill those gaps effectively. Furthermore, it addresses the various challenges Nepal faces within the SAARC framework, suggesting ways to enhance its involvement while safeguarding its sovereignty and national security interests. The findings highlight Nepal's active participation in SAARC initiatives, such as trade agreements and disaster management frameworks, showcasing the organization as a platform for enhancing economic integration, connectivity, and regional stability. Additionally, the article reveals Nepal's strategic use of SAARC to balance its relationships with neighboring giants India and China, mitigating challenges to its sovereignty and security. Despite significant benefits, the research underscores the persistent obstacles posed by regional power dynamics, political instability, and trade imbalances. Ultimately, this article highlights the vital significance of Nepal's participation in SAARC, stressing its potential to promote stability and prosperity across South Asia.

**Keywords:** SAARC, sovereignty, security, international, framework

### 1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the 21st century, global transformations are reshaping the contours of IR, emphasizing the significance of regional cooperation. As the world navigates through revolutionary changes, regional organizations emerge as crucial actors in fostering peace, prosperity, and security.

Notably, Asia mirrors the developmental trajectory of 19th-century Europe, marked by evolving international institutions, nationalism, and complex inter-state dynamics. Today, a nation's success is gauged not solely by its defensive capabilities or national institutions, but by its adaptability to global and regional trends, economic prowess, and cultural influence on the international stage. Regional associations like SAARC have risen as crucial platforms for

political and economic engagement, reflecting the growing importance of regionalism in contemporary geopolitics.

SAARC comprises seven member states, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Despite their diversity in land area, GDP, and population, these nations share a common border with at least one member, fostering unique regional dynamics. SAARC's inception reflects the global trend towards greater regional economic integration, inspired by successful models like the EU. SAARC envisions an economic union and common currency among its members, underscoring its aspirations for deeper regional cooperation.

This article looks to explore Nepal's engagement within the SAARC framework, with a particular focus on promoting sovereignty and national security. Against the backdrop of globalization, regionalism assumes heightened significance, offering avenues for economic integration, political collaboration, and security cooperation.

SAARC is an institutionalized platform. Established with the primary aim of fostering regional cooperation in South Asia, SAARC is primarily perceived as an economic grouping geared towards accelerating socio-economic and cultural development.

## **Background**

### **1.1 Origins of SAARC**

Iqbal (2006) tracks the genesis of SAARC through a series of deliberations and diplomatic initiatives aimed at fostering regional cooperation in South Asia. The evolution of SAARC can be portrayed into four distinct phases: Conception (1977-80), Meeting of Foreign Secretaries (1981-83), Meeting of Foreign Ministers (1983-85), and Summits (1985-2004).

### **1.2 Nepal's Role in SAARC: Significance and Contribution**

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) outlines Nepal's crucial role as a founding member and the current Chair of SAARC on its official website. Since the establishment of SAARC in 1985, Nepal has been steadfastly engaged in fostering regional cooperation and integration within South Asia.

SAARC operates through a variety of mechanisms, including summits, councils, committees, and specialized centers, to address a diverse array of issues spanning economic cooperation, trade, health, environment, and security. Nepal has actively participated in these endeavors, hosting numerous summits and meetings to propel regional cooperation within the SAARC framework.

A noteworthy milestone achieved under Nepal's leadership was the 18th SAARC Summit convened in Kathmandu in November 2014. During this summit, SAARC leaders reaffirmed their commitment to deepening regional integration and cooperation to promote peace and prosperity in the region. The Kathmandu Declaration, titled 'Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity,' underscored the significance of fostering mutual trust, understanding, cooperation, and partnership among member states.

Furthermore, SAARC has been actively pursuing initiatives to enhance connectivity within the region, such as the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement and SAARC Regional Railways

Agreement, aimed at bolstering physical and people-to-people connectivity. The organization has also prioritized economic cooperation, trade facilitation, and investment promotion to expedite regional integration and realize the objectives outlined in the SAARC Charter.

### **1.3 Significance and implications for Nepal in SAARC**

Kumar posits that SAARC emerged within the context of a post-World War II landscape characterized by the formation of various regional organizations, including NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Established in 1985 with seven member states, SAARC expanded to include Afghanistan in 2007. Bangladesh played a crucial role in initiating regional cooperation, overcoming hurdles to unite diverse South Asian nations.

Nepal, situated between India and China, views SAARC as highly significant due to its geographical location and geopolitical dynamics. The platform provides Nepal with opportunities to bolster relations with neighboring states, diversify from reliance on India, and foster economic cooperation, industrial development, and security.

For Nepal, SAARC membership offers a sense of security crucial for a landlocked nation surrounded by regional powers. Additionally, it serves as a mechanism to counterbalance Indian dominance, providing smaller states like Nepal with a platform for equality within the region. Nepal's foreign policy has long been shaped by geopolitical considerations, with its position between India and China influencing diplomatic maneuvers and policy decisions. Despite historical ties and geographical proximity to India, Nepal's rugged terrain presents challenges in connectivity with China, its northern neighbor. Balancing relations with both India and China is imperative for Nepal's strategic interests, as alignment with either could jeopardize its sovereignty.

Despite constitutional provisions for an independent foreign policy, Nepal's geopolitical realities pose challenges to achieving true autonomy. However, recent political stability offers an opportunity for Nepal to focus on economic development. Its strategic location positions Nepal as a potential hub for regional economic cooperation, enabling it to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Nepal's support for China's enhanced role in SAARC reflects its strategic calculations to counterbalance India's dominance. Economically, Nepal benefits from regional cooperation through SAARC, mitigating landlocked constraints and fostering industrial and technological development.

SAARC agreements such as SAPTA and SAFTA aim to boost intra-regional trade, providing Nepal with opportunities for economic integration and growth. Despite trade deficits with some SAARC countries, Nepal's participation in regional trade agreements remains crucial for economic diversification and attracting foreign direct investment. Moreover, SAARC plays a vital role in disaster management and rehabilitation efforts, as witnessed during Nepal's earthquake in 2015.

SAARC serves as a crucial platform for Nepal's socio-economic development, security, and regional integration, facilitating cooperation and collective progress in South Asia.

## **2. Literature Review**

Nepal's participation in the UN and its subsidiary organs, the formation of the UN Convention on the Law of Sea, and membership in various regional and global organizations

such as SAARC, WTO, WB, IMF, the ADB, among others, underscore its strategic choice in embracing multilateralism (Nayak, 2014). He continues that Nepal seeks to actively engage in different multilateral initiatives to facilitate cooperation on threats that it cannot resolve alone. By leveraging multilateral solutions, Nepal aims to overcome vulnerabilities and assert its sovereignty on the global stage.

The multilateral structure and strategies allow Nepal to play an active role in organizing collective responses to non-conventional threats, a role crucial for small states (Powel, 2002).

Through platforms like the UN and SAARC, Nepal advocates for non-interference policies and champions the interests of small developing states.

Figures like Yadunath Khanal (1988) have played crucial roles in shaping regional organizations like SAARC and establishing their headquarters in Kathmandu. Each diplomatic envoy sent to multilateral arenas aims to safeguard Nepal's sovereignty and national interests within the framework of collective norms and rules.

In light of the interdependence and globalization prevalent in today's world, Nepal adopts a policy of active participation in multilateral forums. Article 50.4 of the directive principles of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) underscores this commitment.

Khadka (2020) carried out a study on Nepal, as a small state, grappling with challenges while navigating its geopolitical constraints. Nepal's security challenges are multidimensional, encompassing transnational issues like terrorism, organized crime, and nuclear proliferation, as well as internal factors like political instability and economic vulnerability. The absence of a governing superstructure in the international arena necessitates Nepal's reliance on its own resources for survival. The evolving concept of small states underscores the importance of sovereignty and self-determination, principles that resonate with Nepal's historical experiences.

Williams (2004) studied traditional approaches to resolving sovereignty-based conflicts, highlighting the "sovereignty first" and "self-determination first" paradigms. These paradigms often lead to political deadlock and violence due to their limitations. To address these challenges, the concept of earned sovereignty has emerged as an alternative conflict resolution strategy.

### **3. Statement of the problem**

There are implicit concepts relevant to understanding Nepal's engagement within the SAARC framework. Issues concerning various aspect of an international framework, i.e. sovereignty, national security, and SAARC itself, need to be understood.

#### **3.1 Sovereignty**

Hansen & Stepputat, F. (2006) report, that the discourse on "sovereignty" has undergone significant reevaluation in recent times, particularly influenced by the scholarship of Giorgio Agamben. In the contemporary global context, the notion of sovereignty faces challenges from transnational corporations, NGOs and evolving ethnic conflicts, which have blurred the traditional boundaries of nation-states. Despite these challenges, events like the aftermath of 9/11 underscored the enduring importance of national sovereignty, war, and security regimes

as fundamental aspects of modern states. The complexity of sovereignty is exemplified by situations such as Iraq post-2003, where multiple centers of power vie for control over people and territory, both legally and de facto.

Recent scholarship on sovereignty aims to transcend theoretical impasses in anthropology by focusing on de facto sovereignty—the ability to exercise power and violence with impunity—rather than solely on formal ideologies of rule and legality. This shift encourages exploration of how sovereignty is enacted in everyday life and emphasizes the role of violence in establishing and maintaining authority. Additionally, contemporary analyses highlight the significance of the body as the locus of sovereign power, challenging conventional notions of sovereignty as solely a legal or political concept. Ethnographic approaches to sovereignty promise to destabilize traditional understandings of sovereignty, much like ethnography has done for religion, the state, and the market.

Interestingly, scholars like Burghart (1990) have explored similar dynamics in regions like Nepal, highlighting the enduring relevance of cultural logics in shaping political authority.

While some attempts have been made to bridge the gap between historical kingship studies and modern politics, challenges persist due to a lack of nuanced understanding of sovereignty and governmental forms. Moreover, the colonial encounter played a crucial role in shaping modern sovereignty, testing and evolving techniques of governance.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy how market forces, enterprises, and concessions have shaped sovereignty and highlighted the historical legacy of colonial economic systems. The relationship between state sovereignty and market dynamics has been studied throughout history, from the earliest colonial ventures to the modern economic zones found in SAARC member nations like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. This relationship is especially important to understand in light of globalization and neoliberal policies.

Gaining insight into the interplay between economic factors and state power within the SAARC framework is crucial in comprehending the intricacies of sovereignty within a regional setting.

### **3.2 National security**

The key definition of "national security" emerges from historical explorations and statutory references. Despite its frequent usage throughout history, "national security" lacks a concise definition, even in significant legislative acts – says Donohue, L. K. (2011).

While some scholars, like Jablonsky et al. (1997) trace the modern usage of "national security" to the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, historical evidence suggests earlier instances of its usage. Discussions during the Constitutional Convention and debates among Yale undergraduates in the 1790s reflect concerns about national security and its relationship to domestic industries. Furthermore, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, discussions on national security were intertwined with debates on national interests and responses to external threats.

Notably, during critical periods such as the Civil War, the term "national security" was invoked to justify various positions, indicating its importance in shaping political discourse.

However, despite its historical significance and frequent invocation in legislative texts, "national security" remains a concept without a universally agreed-upon definition.

Basnet (2022) pins that: the geo-political complexity surrounding Nepal's national security is made worse by its strategic position between China and India, making it a buffer state that faces significant challenges. This dynamic is particularly pronounced within the context of regional organizations like SAARC, where Nepal's sovereignty intersects with the interests of its neighboring giants.

While Nepal maintains its sovereignty and independence, it grapples with geopolitical complexities stemming from the influences of neighboring powers within the SAARC framework. The struggle for Nepal lies in balancing its national interests with the pressures exerted by regional power dynamics, including India's aim to assert dominance and China's concerns about political uncertainty in Nepal.

Basnet (2022) also highlights the democratic deficit as a critical factor affecting Nepal's national security. India's historical interference in Nepali politics, coupled with its desire to maintain influence in the region, has led to proxy wars and manipulations of democratic processes. Within the SAARC context, these dynamics play out as Nepal navigates between the interests of India and China, both of which seek to shape Nepal's political landscape to their advantage. The fragile democracy in Nepal becomes a vulnerability as foreign intelligence agencies operate overtly, influencing policy decisions and undermining the country's sovereignty. Thus, the democratic processes within SAARC nations like Nepal are not only essential for governance but also crucial for safeguarding national security against external interference.

### **3.3 The SAARC framework**

The SAARC framework provides a structured platform for member states to promote regional cooperation and address common challenges. Despite initial skepticism, SAARC has demonstrated resilience, as evidenced by the establishment of SAFTA in its twenty-first year.

Moreover, SAARC has the potential to evolve into a more robust trade deal, facilitating greater regional liberalization and minimizing risks of extra-regional trade diversion. The interest shown by extra-regional partners like the US, Japan, and China in joining SAARC suggests the organization may experience a revitalization in the new century.

The motivations for regional cooperation in South Asia include economic gains, strategic benefits, and developmental and environmental efficiency. By promoting regional integration, South Asian countries aim to achieve economic growth, attract foreign direct investment, enhance security, and address common challenges like energy security and environmental conservation.

The SAARC framework encompasses various specialized bodies, regional centers, and apex bodies aimed at promoting regional cooperation and addressing common challenges within South Asia.

#### 4. Research Questions

1. How does Nepal's participation in the SAARC framework impact its sovereignty, considering the balance between regional cooperation and maintaining national autonomy?

The inclusion of Nepal in the SAARC framework provides an interesting case study to investigate how regional integration affects national sovereignty. Regional integration, according to Pentland (1973), entails governments giving up some sovereignty in exchange for cooperating with their neighbors. This willful mixing and blending with neighbors frequently result in a loss of sovereignty to some extent while bringing in new dispute resolution procedures.

According to (Haas, 1971), regional integration is increased gradually and occasionally as a result of unexpected effects. Neo-functionalists contend that political leaders favor integration because they see it as advantageous in certain circumstances rather than just because it is based on values or ideas. As a result, the choice to engage in regional cooperation—such as joining SAARC—reflects a consideration of the advantages of increased regional cooperation as well as the potential trade-off between some degree of sovereignty loss. This perspective underscores the importance of understanding how Nepal navigates the tension between maintaining national autonomy and engaging in regional cooperation within the SAARC framework.

This view contrasts with functionalism, which emphasizes universal principles, as neo-functionalism specifically emphasizes regional integration. Both theories highlight the idea of spillover, where one action leads to further actions, creating a chain of events that necessitates more action (Pentland (1973); Keohane (1993); Mutimer (1994)). This perspective provides an understanding for how Nepal's participation in SAARC impacts its sovereignty, as it navigates the balance between regional cooperation and maintaining national autonomy.

Nepal's participation in the SAARC framework is deeply intertwined with the imperative of safeguarding its sovereignty amidst the backdrop of historical animosities and power imbalances within South Asia. The inception of SAARC in 1985 marked a significant milestone in regional cooperation, aiming to foster collaboration among South Asian nations while upholding principles of sovereign equality and mutual benefit (Government of Bangladesh. (1980, November)). However, the historical antagonism between India and Pakistan, coupled with their dominant positions within the region, has posed challenges to the realization of these principles.

Nepal, along with other smaller South Asian countries, has grappled with concerns regarding perceived Indian hegemony and the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in the region. This has manifested in various forms, including disputes over economic matters and struggles for equitable resource allocation. For instance, tensions between India and Bangladesh over water sharing underscore the complexities of regional challenges, while Nepal's economic reliance on India highlights the vulnerabilities stemming from these power differentials.

Despite SAARC's aim to promote sovereignty and mutual cooperation, the Indo-centric nature of the region has often led to discord among smaller nations, exacerbating rather than

mitigating concerns over sovereignty. This has been further exacerbated by the limited success of SAARC compared to other regional blocs like ASEAN, primarily due to ongoing bilateral conflicts and the overarching influence of larger states like India.

The post-Cold War era witnessed a transformation in SAARC's role, driven by economic imperatives and pressures from international bodies advocating for globalization and trade liberalization. Despite these shifts, the historical tensions between India and Pakistan continued to shape regional dynamics, affecting smaller South Asian nations like Nepal.

However, the 1990s saw notable improvements in bilateral relations between India and its smaller neighbors, marked by treaties on river water sharing and transit agreements, signaling a potential shift towards accommodating neighboring states' interests. SAARC's initiatives, such as SAPTA and later SAFTA, aimed at promoting trade liberalization among member states, yet challenges persisted due to unequal market sizes and geopolitical factors.

According to Baral (2018), safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, and promoting economic prosperity form the bedrock of Nepal's foreign policy objectives. Indeed, foreign policy serves as a potent tool for analyzing a state's status and power on the international stage (Bojang, 2018). In the case of Nepal, the fineness of foreign policy is further shown by its geographical proximity to major powers like India and China.

Moreover, Nepal's political landscape has been a defining factor in shaping its foreign policy objectives. The nation's journey through various political transitions has underscored the critical role of political stability in ensuring effective foreign policy formulation and implementation. However, challenges stemming from political instability have often posed hurdles in achieving Nepal's foreign policy goals, underscoring the intrinsic link between domestic politics and international relations (Bhattarai, 2018).

The basis of foreign policies relies on how friendly a country is with others. With globalization, it's tougher to keep good relationships with every country, especially for Nepal, which is stuck between India and China. Nepal needs to be fair with all countries while looking out for its own interests. This means making smart decisions in both domestic and foreign policy.

Nepal's ability to deal with other countries depends on its strong political system. These friendships are based on working together and having common interests.

Making friends with other countries is really important for Nepal. By working together, Nepal can reach its goals and make the world a better place for everyone.

Theoretical frameworks of cooperation, competition, and rivalry shape trans-border interactions in regions like South Asia. Cooperation initiatives presuppose the sharing of resources, institutions, and policies among participating countries, potentially challenging their sovereignty and national identity. Resource-sharing arrangements may evoke perceptions of loss of control and erosion of sovereignty, triggering reluctance to cooperate and even withdrawal from regional processes. Despite formal commitments, issues like resource nationalism hinder cooperation efforts, exemplified by stalled projects such as the Mahakali River Agreement between India and Nepal.



In South Asia, countries exhibit defensive positionalism, exemplified by India's prolonged negotiations over the Treaty on Ganges River Sharing with Bangladesh. Concerns over sovereignty have led to the abandonment of projects, such as the trilateral gas pipeline between Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India. Despite recent breakthroughs in bilateral cooperation, such as the Bangladesh–India Friendship Power Company, challenges persist due to unresolved sovereignty issues.

Sovereignty remains a critical issue across South Asia, transcending differences in size, military power, and economic orientation. Addressing perceptions of sovereignty is paramount within regional cooperation frameworks like SAARC, necessitating a departure from traditional cooperation models. Despite past initiatives like beneficial bilateralism and unilateral gestures, sustained institutionalization remains elusive due to domestic political constraints.

The unfolding dynamics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's neighborhood first policy and cooperative federalism offer potential avenues for consolidating regionalism in South Asia. However, leveraging successful bilateral initiatives to reinforce regional cooperation within SAARC requires further exploration and integration into broader foreign policy frameworks.

In examining Nepal's participation in the SAARC framework and its impact on sovereignty, it becomes evident that the nation's foreign policy objectives are intricately linked with safeguarding its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and promoting economic prosperity. Despite past initiatives and bilateral cooperation, sustained institutionalization within SAARC remains elusive due to domestic constraints. Moving forward, leveraging successful bilateral initiatives and incorporating them into broader foreign policy frameworks offer potential avenues for consolidating regionalism in South Asia and addressing sovereignty concerns within the SAARC framework.

2. What are the key challenges and opportunities for Nepal in leveraging the SAARC framework to enhance its national security, particularly in the context of regional geopolitical dynamics and emerging security threats?

To delve into how SAARC approaches regional collaboration and its implications for national security, let's examine its utilization of the Nordic model. This framework maintains the status quo of national politics while directing collaborative efforts towards less politically charged domains, sidestepping issues of high political sensitivity such as national security. SAARC member nations reach consensus decisions, sidelining discussions on domestic affairs, bilateral concerns, and contentious subjects. This incremental approach, akin to the Nordic model, becomes imperative owing to the significant influence of politics in South Asian dynamics. Collaboration often commences with political deliberations before transitioning to technical or cultural realms, a progression characterized by gradual advancements, as noted by Paranjape (2002); Myers (1991).

Nepal's participation in the SAARC framework is integral to its efforts in promoting national security within the South Asian region. However, persistent tensions and conflicts, particularly between India and Pakistan, have posed formidable challenges to the achievement of collective security objectives. Nepal, like other South Asian countries, has been impacted by these dynamics, facing the complexities of navigating regional security concerns while safeguarding its own national interests.

During the Cold War, South Asian countries prioritized external alliances, introducing superpower rivalries and exacerbating intra-regional tensions. This historical backdrop significantly influenced the formation and evolution of initiatives like SAARC, impacting efforts to foster cooperation within the region, reports Bajpai (2003). Moreover, the Indo-centric nature of the region, coupled with India's predominant position, has often led to perceptions of Indian hegemony and concerns over security asymmetry among smaller South Asian nations (Sisson & Rose, L.E., 1990). Nepal's strategic location between India and China further adds to its security calculus, requiring a nuanced approach to regional cooperation and alliance-building.

In the 1990s, India changed how it dealt with its neighbors like Nepal and Bangladesh. They signed important agreements about sharing river waters in 1996, showing a commitment to better relations. India also allowed Nepalese goods to pass through to Bangladesh by road in 1997, making trade easier and boosting regional connections.

This shift came with the Gujral Doctrine, named after former Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral. It stressed being friendly and helpful to neighbors without expecting anything in return. The doctrine aimed to make India stronger in South Asia by being kind instead of bossy. It also tried to make up for India's distance from the West by building friendships with other regions like Southeast Asia. Overall, the Gujral Doctrine aimed to improve India's relationships in the region and beyond.

Additionally, the presence of observer states from outside the region highlighted the international interest in SAARC, potentially influencing regional security dynamics. Nepal's participation in SAARC initiatives aimed at promoting collective security measures reflects its commitment to safeguarding its national interests while contributing to regional stability.

As Afghanistan's membership in SAARC demonstrates, the integration of neighboring countries into the regional framework can enhance security through collective anti-terrorism measures and economic integration.

As Acharya, M.R. (2023) said in his speech, aligning foreign policy with national interests is crucial for Nepal's sovereignty and security. Our constitution outlines key interests like sovereignty and economic prosperity, guiding our foreign and security policies. Core interests, including sovereignty and border security, take precedence over other considerations. Wise management of natural resources, particularly water and hydropower, is vital for sustainable development and regional cooperation. Addressing domestic challenges while pursuing national interests is imperative. Nepal has made strides in infrastructure and human development but must fulfill promises of prosperity. Strengthening institutions and diplomatic capacity is essential for effective defense of our interests. Utilizing all aspects of national power – political, economic, military, and diplomatic – is essential. Prioritizing strategic engagements based on shared interests is key, avoiding entanglements in rivalries. Evaluating diplomatic proposals based on our principles and interests ensures autonomy in decision-making.

Kamal & Batool, S. (2019) offer the insight that at the regional level, the involvement of China alongside Pakistan and India complicates security dynamics. China's support for Pakistan against India and India's concerns about China's influence contribute to regional tensions, fueling an arms race. Moreover, historical proxy conflicts between superpowers,

notably during the Cold War, exacerbated Indo-Pakistani tensions and impacted regional security dynamics.

At the global level, superpower interventions in South Asia, particularly during the Afghan War, exploited Indo-Pakistani tensions for strategic gain. Shifts in US foreign policy towards India post-9/11 further influenced regional dynamics. Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex (RSC) model helps analyze the complex interactions between India, Pakistan, and major powers, shedding light on regional security challenges and their impact on economic integration efforts within SAARC.

Bajpai (1996) asserts that the security dynamics in South Asia are intricate, compounded by internal discord and external pressures. In Nepal, tensions along ethnic and religious lines have heightened, raising apprehensions about potential intervention from India, particularly in the Terai region. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka remains in a prolonged civil conflict between the Sinhala-dominated government/ Although Punjab has shown signs of stabilization, areas like Kashmir, Karachi, and West Punjab in Pakistan continue to grapple with violence and instability. SAARC's efforts to bolster regional security encounter hurdles as external threats wane, inter-state tensions persist, and intra-state conflicts escalate.

Despite bilateral endeavors, SAARC's capacity to substantially contribute to these efforts is restricted, emphasizing the importance of ongoing bilateral dialogue and the exploration of additional strategies.

In South Asia, there's no unified regional security policy, and countries see external threats differently. Attempts to create a common strategy have faced challenges. After independence, India tried to create a security community by protecting Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim with bilateral treaties, fearing Chinese influence. But over time, each country developed its own security views.

Nepal, for example, balanced relations with India and China, stressing economic development and an independent foreign policy to protect sovereignty. The Zone of Peace proposal, backed by Nepal and others like the US and China, shows Nepal's commitment to peace. But India's concerns about its security complicate matters.

Initiatives like SAARC and better Sino-Indian relations could improve regional cooperation, but success depends on prioritizing cooperation and addressing shared security issues.

In terms of security, Nepal's regional context largely revolves around the economic aid it receives from its allies and international financial institutions. Nepali officials place significant importance on their relationship with the United States, even if it is largely symbolic. They perceive U.S. policy in South Asia as supportive of smaller states seeking greater interdependence with India.

Most South Asian states, except for India and Bhutan, maintain closer ties with the U.S. than with the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, smaller states, including Pakistan, became more assertive in seeking security through extraregional options. Nepal, while remaining neutral, has been cautious in its approach toward the Soviet Union since the 1970s.

Both India and China, Nepal's principal neighbors, are not favorable to Soviet influence in the region due to their own strategic interests and national considerations. India, in particular, views Soviet expansion into Nepal as a threat to its own security structure. Therefore, there is potential for India and China to develop a shared security scenario concerning the region south of the Himalayas, which could benefit both countries.

Regional states are advised to pursue a balanced policy toward the superpowers and avoid strong denunciations that could provoke them, considering the impact of their actions on the regional balance of power, says Baral L. (1986).

## **5. Research Objectives**

While there has been extensive scholarly attention on regional cooperation within the framework of SAARC, particularly focusing on economic development, political cooperation, and cultural exchange, there exists a notable research gap regarding Nepal's role in promoting sovereignty and national security within this regional context.

Existing literature predominantly focuses on broader regional dynamics and the role of major players like India and Pakistan, often overlooking the nuanced perspectives and experiences of smaller member states like Nepal.

Given Nepal's unique geopolitical position, historical context, and domestic challenges, there is a need for in-depth research exploring how Nepal navigates sovereignty concerns and national security priorities within the SAARC framework. Such research could shed light on Nepal's policy approaches, diplomatic strategies, and interactions with other member states to safeguard its sovereignty and enhance national security in the face of regional dynamics and transnational threats.

Understanding Nepal's engagement with SAARC from the perspective of sovereignty promotion and national security would not only fill a significant gap in the existing literature but also provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking to strengthen regional cooperation and security architecture in South Asia.

## **6. Methodology**

The research employs a descriptive research design focusing on Nepal's role in the SAARC framework to explore its impact on sovereignty and national security. A purposive sampling design was adopted, limiting sources to relevant academic articles, books, and policy documents. Data collection relied exclusively on secondary data obtained through systematic literature review and document analysis, ensuring comprehensive coverage of thematic areas. The data analysis plan involved content analysis to identify key trends, themes, and patterns, systematically synthesizing findings to draw informed conclusions on the subject.

## **7. Results & Discussions**

As outlined by Lama (2018), the SAARC process, aimed at fostering mutual trust and understanding, is hindered by persistent mistrust and suspicion, rendering its regionalist agenda ineffective. Despite provisions for unanimity in decision-making and the exclusion of bilateral issues, the postponement of summits due to bilateral disputes, such as the 19th

SAARC Summit in 2016, highlights the impact of bilateral tensions on SAARC's functioning.

Several factors contribute to this trust deficit, including historical, geostrategic, and socio-economic issues. Key challenges include the treatment of borders solely as national security concerns, the linkage of national sovereignty with resource sharing, and discrepancies between SAARC's objectives and its performance.

The traditional view of borders as mere lines has led to neglect of their broader significance as borderlands, where cultural, economic, and environmental interactions occur. Recognizing borderlands as hubs of connectivity and cooperation can facilitate economic integration and people-to-people contacts, transforming borders into opportunities for regional development.

Future conflicts are likely to arise from issues such as natural resource management, environmental degradation, and climate change, emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in border management towards softer, more cooperative approaches. Recognizing and harnessing the potential of borderlands can pave the way for greater regional cooperation and conflict resolution in South Asia.

The SAARC faces significant challenges in its efforts to promote cooperation. Despite differences with other regional groups and various conflicts, it has followed a standard model for integration, starting with PTA and aiming to progress to a FTA and beyond. However, progress has been slow, with the first step taking over 25 years to achieve. The SAPTA was signed in 1993 but faced difficulties in implementation. Four rounds of negotiations have taken place, covering thousands of products, but progress has been limited.

Some scholars say that the SAARC institution has been hindered by government inaction, bureaucracy, and national biases, limiting the involvement of the private sector and civil society. Despite these constraints, "non-governmental SAARC" and "people's SAARC" have shown progress, hinting at a new regionalism in South Asia.

Without innovative thinking and practical approaches, SAARC will remain stagnant, they add, potentially leading to increased influence from outside the region. Many summit decisions, such as poverty alleviation and anti-terrorism measures, have been ignored.

The 6th SAARC Summit in 1991 prioritized poverty alleviation and established the ISACPA. However, progress has been minimal, with poverty alleviation goals diluted over time. In later summits, leaders reiterated commitments without meaningful action.

Although with these limitations, Nepal's participation in SAARC holds profound significance, not only for its own national interests but also for the broader regional dynamics within South Asia. This significance is underscored by examining Nepal's relationships with its neighboring countries, particularly India, a key member of SAARC.

India, Nepal's significant neighboring country, shares historical and cultural ties deeply rooted in thousands of years of interaction – accounted for by (Singh, 2023). Despite occasional strains, friendly relations have been the norm, as evidenced by their support for each other in international forums such as the United Nations and the Bandung Conference in 1955, where the slogan 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai' symbolized their camaraderie. However, historical events such as the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India in 1959 led to tensions

between India and China, culminating in the Sino-Indian war of 1962. This conflict not only altered the regional landscape but also shaped the trajectory of India-Nepal relations.

India's response to the border dispute with China and its subsequent interactions have had ripple effects on Nepal. While efforts to thaw relations began in 1968 and continued with significant initiatives like Rajiv Gandhi's visit in 1988 and Manmohan Singh's endeavors in 2008, challenges persist. Recent attempts at reconciliation, including Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India in 2014, marked by the signing of numerous agreements, reflect a desire for cooperation. However, uncertainties linger, underscoring the delicate nature of India-Nepal-China dynamics and their implications for regional stability and security.

By actively participating in SAARC initiatives, Nepal can leverage its relationships with neighboring countries to promote economic development, enhance regional connectivity, and address common security concerns. Moreover, Nepal's involvement in SAARC underscores its commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperation, reaffirming its role as a responsible member of the international community.

Similarly, Prasad & Chakravarty, S. (2023) says that Nepal's participation in SAARC provides a platform for addressing regional challenges and advancing sustainable development goals. By learning from each other's experiences, sharing knowledge, and working collaboratively, SAARC countries, including Nepal, can accelerate their progress towards achieving the SDGs and create a more sustainable and inclusive future for all.

The participation of Nepal in SAARC holds significant implications, particularly concerning trade relations with India. Despite being a member of SAFTA, Nepal's access to the Indian market remains largely unchanged from its existing arrangements under the Nepal-India Trade Treaty. This continuity presents challenges for Nepali businesses, as the trade rules within SAFTA closely resemble those of the bilateral treaty. Moreover, Nepal faces the risk of preference erosion in the Indian market due to concessions granted to other LDCs, exacerbating concerns about maintaining its competitive edge.

It is essential for Nepal to adopt a clear and uniform approach to trade matters within SAARC. This includes treating all member countries equally, thereby reducing the risk of trade diversion and alleviating the strain on resources required for negotiating multiple trade agreements. Consistency in trade policies not only fosters regional cooperation but also maximizes the mutual benefits available within the SAARC framework.

## 8. Conclusion

There is a growing importance of regional cooperation in the 21st century, with SAARC playing a crucial role in fostering peace, prosperity, and security in South Asia. Nepal's engagement within the SAARC framework is significant for promoting sovereignty, national security, and economic development, reflecting the transformative potential of regionalism in the region.

The analysis of Nepal's participation in the SAARC framework underscores its significance in promoting sovereignty and national security within the region. Nepal's engagement with SAARC reflects its commitment to fostering regional cooperation, addressing common

challenges, and enhancing its own security interests. Through initiatives like SAFTA and efforts to strengthen connectivity and trade, Nepal aims to leverage regional partnerships to bolster its economic development and security resilience. However, challenges such as trade barriers, geopolitical tensions, and internal conflicts within SAARC member states pose obstacles to achieving these objectives.

Moving forward, Nepal must continue to actively engage in SAARC while also exploring bilateral and multilateral avenues to safeguard its sovereignty and national security. By prioritizing diplomacy, conflict resolution, and socioeconomic development, Nepal can contribute to a more stable and prosperous South Asian region while safeguarding its own interests and sovereignty.

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