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Regional Cooperation Mechanisms in Central and South Asia – Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)* *

Abstract

The economic, political, cultural, as well as overall social development of the Central and South Asian countries, largely depends on how they cooperate in numerous areas of interest. Regional integration and regional cooperation of states in Central and South Asia have become very important in the last few decades, especially after the independence of the Central Asian Republics. This is primarily important both because of the current globalization trends on the one hand and because of the spread of regionalism in the world on the other. In particular, for these countries, the issue of regional cooperation has always been a top priority, especially because both regions - Central and South Asia - are characterized by a large number of open political, economic, territorial, and ethnic issues, as well as threats to peace and security due to terrorism. In such circumstances, regional cooperation is seen as one of the basic ways to solve these problems. Another issue is whether and to what extent this type of regional cooperation has been achieved due to the existence of all the mentioned problems. Although there are several regional mechanisms and organizations in these regions - the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization - that have strong economic and political influence, there are also lesser-known regional mechanisms with great potential to make a significant contribution to the overall regional cooperation in this geopolitical space. Taking that fact into account, this paper aims to present these regional organizations and programs of economic, and to a certain extent, political cooperation, between the countries of Central and South Asia – Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) - through the history of their origin, organizational structure, ways of functioning and decision making, goals and principles on which they are based.

Keywords: regionalism, regional organization, regional cooperation, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, we have witnessed a growing interest in social, cultural, political and especially economic regional cooperation and integration among countries belonging to the same geographical regions. As some authors point out, the concept of the region itself varies from discipline to discipline, but in addition to the main feature of regionalism - geographical proximity, they highlight the view that regions are actually socially constructed and often a political concept, which in some cases does not have to coincide with geographical borders of the region.¹ So, if we want to understand 'region', we also have to figure out how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of 'regionness'.² Regionalism as an institutionalized process of integration and the formation of the region by fostering connectivity among states began primarily in Europe after the Second World War and is embodied in European integration, i.e. the European Union. As such, it was considered as a model for future regions that began to be created around the world, and in Asia as well.³ Although this form of regionalism served as a model for the countries of Central and South Asia at certain moments, it did not develop to such a degree of integration and institutionalization in these regions. This was primarily because the model of the European Union implied a certain degree of not only economic integration but also a political one.⁴

Both these regions abound in political conflicts, which slows down or even prevents this type of integration, such as the EU integration model. Instead, regional organizations and mechanisms in Central and South Asia, as well as the process of regionalism itself, are closer to ASEAN⁵ as a model, which implies creating conditions for better cooperation, primarily economic, among states, but does not question the importance and role of sovereign nation-states with any supranational elements. Due to such characteristics, it was easier to emulate this kind of international cooperation.⁶ Additionally, as Buranelli points out, in the Central Asian region "[...] there are ideas of informal regionalism and order that do not necessarily mirror the integrationist dynamics that we have experienced in Europe and other parts of the world."⁷ When it comes to SAARC, according to Raihan and Nguyen, Association has adopted a mixture of the four approaches to regional cooperation and integration "a top-down approach based on binding agreements" (example EU), "a top-down approach based on open regionalism, consensus, and voluntary principles" (example ASEAN), "bottom-up, market-driven approach" and "geographically focused regional cooperation and integration programs and projects" (example CAREC).⁸ However, economic regionalisation as the promotion of interregional economic linkages

1 K. Yhome, T. S. Maini, "Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond", *ORF Occasional Paper 135*, Observer Research Foundation, 2017, pp. 3-4.

2 Ibidem.

3 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, "Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 201, pp. 14031-14032

4 T. Mahmood, "SAARC and Regional Politics", *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 2000, p. 14.

5 For more details see: Д. Митровић (ед.), *Регионални механизми Азије*, Факултет политичких наука, Хрестоматија, 2009

6 R. Pomfret, "The Economic Cooperation Organization: Current Status and Future Prospects", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, DOI: 10.1080/09668139708412465, Routledge, 1997, p. 655

7 E. Aidarkhanova, "Regionalism and Regional Order in Central Asia: An Interview with Filippo Costa Buranelli", *Voices of Central Asia*, September 9, 2021, Available at: <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/regionalism-and-regional-order-in-central-asia-an-interview-with-flippo-costa-buranelli/>

8 S. Raihan and C. M. Nguyen, "Introduction", in Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, pp. 2-4

by Central Asian states and South Asian governments has been evident for years and was reflected in the gradual, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, removal of barriers to mutual trade in goods and services, preferential trade agreements, as well as in negotiations of possible formation of free trade areas, customs unions and by freeing the international exchange of labour and capital.

The ECO region covers eight million square-kilometre of land and has approximately 500 (457,534,000) million people, comprising six per cent of the world population with a GDP of 1,968,910 (million USD).⁹ The share of the ECO Region's trade in the global trade is about 2 per cent.¹⁰ The region occupies a vital geopolitical location, bordered by Russia, China, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian basin which gives it great strategic importance. Central Asia forms the continental link of Europe with the rest of Asia, primarily with China, and as such, it is the geographical heart of Eurasia. Also, the ECO countries are characterized by a common religion, culture, and historical affinities.¹¹ When we talk about the region of Central Asia only (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan), this region covers an area of almost four million square kilometres with more than seventy million inhabitants. Strategic significance i.e. geopolitical attractiveness of Central Asia and the ECO region as a whole, which are rich in natural resources - natural gas, uranium, non-ferrous metals (especially gold) and other mineral resources¹² - activates the political and economic engagement of great and regional powers around access, control, transport and the use of these resources. For this reason, for the countries of the ECO region, the processes of self-initiated strengthening of regional integration and creation of the regional identity with some sort of formalized type of cooperation are very important. In this way, the economic comparative advantages that the region possesses would be achieved in the best way and for the benefit of all member states.¹³

South Asia, home to more than 1.8 billion people or about one-fourth of the world's population, covering about 5.2 million km² and 11.71% of the Asian continent is the most populous and the most densely populated geographical region in the world.¹⁴ GDP (PPP) of the South Asian region is \$ 12.752 trillion in 2018.¹⁵ Politically (SAARC member-states) the region covers about 4,480,000 km². South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

9 S. I. Raza, "Alvi for more trade, connectivity among ECO states", *DAWN*, June 2, 2021, Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1626960/alvi-for-more-trade-connectivity-among-eco-states>; *Perspectives Of Intra-Regional Trade in ECO Countries*, Ministry of Economy and Budget Planning of the Republic of Kazakhstan, JSC Economic Research Institute, 2013, p. 6.

10 A. Muhammad, "ECO Vision 2025: An overview", *ECO Secretariat Staff Papers*, The Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, p. 4.

11 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, "Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 201, p. 14033

12 For more details see: Д. Митровић (ед.), *Регионални механизми Азије*, Факултет политичких наука, Хрестоматија, 2009

13 One of the important Programs aimed at establishing such regional cooperation, which includes some countries of the ECO region is Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC). This regional economic arrangement was created on the initiative of the Asian Development Bank in 1997. The basic idea was to encourage economic cooperation among the countries of the Central Asia region. In that sense, the member countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Pakistan (2010), Turkmenistan (2010), Georgia (2016). This program is primarily focused on financing infrastructure projects as well as improving the environment, especially in the fields of transport, road infrastructure, in particular, energy, trade policy and trade facilitation, especially in the areas of customs. Within this program, several multilateral institutions and organizations operate, such as the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the IMF, the Islamic Development Bank, the UN Development Program, and the World Bank. "Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program", *Asia Regional Integration Center - Tracking Asian Integration*, Available at: <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/central-asian-regional-economic-cooperation-program>

14 *South Asia Regional Overview*, South Asian Regional Development Gateway, Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20081121043924/http://www.sardeg.org/marketana.asp>

15 *World Economic Outlook Database*, Select Country Groups (aggregated data), International Monetary Fund, 2021, Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2021/October/select-aggr-data>

(SAARC) is the only regional organization of its kind that brings together the countries of the South Asian region with the aim of better intra-regional integration to accelerate economic growth and to improve the quality of life in the region.¹⁶ The region of South Asia faces several religious, ethnic, economic, and border disputes, especially when it comes to relations between India and Pakistan. The relationship between these two countries largely determines how the Organization will function in the future, i.e. how it will achieve its goals and visions.¹⁷ On the other side, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are members of the previously mentioned Economic Cooperation Organisation and SAARC, thus connecting the ECO region with the region of South Asia. As Pandey explained, „in spite of many differences in present-day official attitudes, religions, social systems, and political setups, the people of the region carry some common imprints of the great civilizations which flourished in this part of the world“.¹⁸ However, as Yhome and Maini put it “the idea of a regional grouping in South Asia emerged from within a diverse set of interests among its member states [...] given this characteristic, South Asia has been a ‘formal’ region rather than a ‘real’ region“.¹⁹ The main characteristic of the ECO region largely distinguishes the SAARC region as well - the geostrategic location of the region which results in the great powers’ geopolitical engagement. This external factor is very important in the case of both organizations, especially in terms of the success or failure of their visions.²⁰ However, this issue will not be addressed in this paper.

The main goal of this paper is to describe how these two organizations emerged, in what context they were founded and with what goals. Special attention will be paid to how they function, what their main institutions are, as well as what their greatest achievements are. For these reasons, the paper is divided into two parts, one dedicated to Economic Cooperation Organisation and the other to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Therefore, the paper will not deal with these organizations in a comparative perspective but will describe them individually and separately. The goal is to inform the professional public, especially the academic public in Serbia, about these two predominantly economic mechanisms, which, at least when it comes to the Balkans, is little known and poorly covered in the academic literature. This is important primarily because these two regions, as well as the Balkans, in addition to obvious differences, are characterized by numerous contextual and structural similarities, so it is useful, both academically and socially, to look at their experiences and models of economic and political regional cooperation and integration.

2. Economic Cooperation Organization - ECO

2.1 Origin and history of the Economic Cooperation Organisation

Economic Cooperation Organization is an intergovernmental regional organization

16 There is also The South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Program, which brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka and also the BBIN Initiative as a subregional architecture of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal.

17 T. Mahmood, “SAARC and Regional Politics”, *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 2000, p. 7.

18 S. R. Pandey, “Towards New Regionalism: Challenges and Stimulus for SAARC”, in: Tomislav Delinic, Nishchal N. Pandey (Eds.), *SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation*, Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2012, p. 74.

19 K. Yhome, T. S. Maini, “Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond”, *ORF Occasional Paper 135*, Observer Research Foundation, 2017, p. 4.

20 For instance: „The special relationships between India and the Soviet Union and between Pakistan and the USA are examples of the difficult circumstances surrounding any increased South Asian cooperation“. T. Delinić, “SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia”, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, 2011, p. 11.

founded in 1985 based on the previously established Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD)²¹ which lasted from 1964 to 1979. The founding countries were Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. According to Ilkin, the origin of the Economic Cooperation Organisation actually dates back to the 1950s when the Baghdad Pact was formed with the participation of Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the USA and the UK which was renamed as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) upon the withdrawal of Iraq from the Baghdad Pact. In 1964 three regional member countries of the CENTO - Iran, Pakistan and Turkey - formed a parallel alliance based on regional economic cooperation named Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) differently from CENTO which objectives were mainly military.²² As Pomfret points out „the origins of ECO have some similarity to those of ASEAN, as both regional bodies were the result of geostrategic considerations to which an economic dimension was added“.²³ The main goal of RCD was to strengthen the cooperation in the fields of socio-economic development, trade, transportation, communication, railways, industry, and banking among member states.²⁴ As the RCD did not give the desired results, especially in terms of trade and industry in 1976 Summit Conference in Izmir was held where the new agreement was reached by which RCD Free Trade Area was established. However, the Organization was dissolved in 1979. In 1985 the RCD was revived under a new name, the Economic Cooperation Organisation.²⁵

The expansion of the organization, when new members joined, came in 1992. At that time, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan joined the organization. After that, more precisely in 1997, a new organizational structure and legal framework of the organization was established based on several documents. Those are: Izmir agreement; ECO organizational structure; Charter on the organization of the ECO Secretariat; Agreement on the legal status of the ECO, National Representations and International Staff; ECO rules and procedures; Methodology of ECO functioning; Economic cooperation strategy of the ECO region; Regulations for ECO Secretariat staff; Economic regulations of the ECO Secretariat.

Armenia and Georgia also had expressed an interest in joining the ECO, but Armenia's membership had been blocked by both Azerbaijan and Turkey because of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. In the case of Georgia's membership no ECO state opposed, but Georgia never became a member, most likely because of internal political context.²⁶ In terms of population as well as economic size the ECO region is dominated by three countries namely Turkey, Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan is the largest country, but Turkey is the regional leader when it comes to the economy.²⁷

21 F. Javid, M. A. Khan, "The Role of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Central Asia: An analytical study", *Wifaqiyan*, vol. 1. No.2, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Karachi, 2015, p. 59.

22 S. Ilkin, "The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) - A Short Note", The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, Available at: <https://sesricdiag.blob.core.windows.net/sesric-site-blob/files/article/32.pdf>, p. 2.

23 R. Pomfret, "The Economic Cooperation Organization: Current Status and Future Prospects", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, DOI: 10.1080/09668139708412465, Routledge, 1997, p. 658.

24 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, "Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 2015, p. 14034.

25 S. Ilkin, "The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) - A Short Note", The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, Available at: <https://sesricdiag.blob.core.windows.net/sesric-site-blob/files/article/32.pdf>, p. 3.

26 F. Javid, M. A. Khan, "The Role of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Central Asia: An analytical study", *Wifaqiyan*, vol. 1. No.2, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Karachi, 2015, p. 62.

27 M. ud Din, Ejaz Ghani, Zafar Mueen Nasir, "A Study On Trading Patterns In The ECO Region", Pakistan Institute Of Development Economics, Islamabad, 2011, p. 7.

The organization was created to promote economic, technical, and cultural cooperation between member states and the legal framework of the organization was the Izmir Treaty signed in 1976, which with certain modifications becomes the ECO Charter.

In 2017, Heads of States/Government of the Member States in their 13th Summit in Islamabad approved "ECO Vision 2025" where main directions of the ECO for the future are drawn.²⁸

In 2021, the 25th Council of Ministers and 15th Summit were held when new decisions and documents were adopted such as holding of ECO Business forum, MOU on railroad Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Tehran, ECO Vision 2025 Mid-term review, the establishment of ECO Clean Energy Centre²⁹, and Ashgabat Consensus for Action which „will promote mutually beneficial cooperation between the ECO member states, ensure general security and stability, and will also give impetus to the economic development of the countries of the region“.³⁰

2.2 ECO Organizational Structure

The main bodies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation are: Council of Ministers; Regional Planning Council; Council of Permanent Representatives; Secretariat. In addition, biennially Summits of heads of state and government are held at the highest level, at which the results achieved in the work of the Organization are audited.

The Heads of State/Government of the Member States meet biennially or more often if considered necessary. The Summit meetings review the objective conditions and progress in implementation of ECO programmes and projects in the highest-level forum possible exchanging views on regional and global issues of common interest to the ECO region.³¹

The Council of Ministers is the highest political and decision-making body of the organization. It is made up of the foreign affairs ministers of the member states, who meet once a year, on a rotating basis. The Council of Ministers may propose the convening of meetings of other Ministers for the formulation and recommendation of Plans and projects in their respective fields. The Council of Ministers is responsible for the decision on and approval of policies, strategies, work programs; appointment of Secretary General and his Deputies as well as Directors; approval of annual budgets; approval of fiscal and administrative rules and regulations, etc. When the Council of Ministers is not in session, their Deputies will carry out the continuation of the task. Deputies will be the Heads of Diplomatic Missions of the Member States accredited to Iran and the concerned Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran.³²

28 *ECO Vision 2025 & Implementation Framework (Annexure)*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3624/1506486491201cflnbtm0accra83f5arho4dgc65.pdf

29 "Briefing for the press on outcomes of 15th ECO", *Economic Cooperation Organisation*, 2021, Available at: <https://www.eco.int/news/88818-Briefing-for-the-press-on-outcomes-of-15th-ECO.html?#News>

30 "Briefing on the results of the XV ECO Summit was held in Ashgabat", November 29, 2021, Available at: <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/42000>

31 "Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO]", Available at: https://www.eco.int/general_content/85366-Summit.html?#General-content

32 S. Ilkin, "The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) - A Short Note", The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, Available at: <https://sesricdiag.blob.core.windows.net/sesric-site-blob/files/article/32.pdf>, p 3.

The Regional Planning Council consists of ECO Planning Representatives or relevant Ministers of the Member States from particular departments. It meets before the Council of Ministers and this body develops basic strategies, policies and plans that are in line with the goals and principles of regional cooperation based on the Izmir Treaty.³³ Also, the Regional Planning Council develops political guidelines and directives of the Council of Ministers and prepares an annual economic report.³⁴

The Council of Permanent Representatives consists of ambassadors of ECO-accredited member states. Council of Permanent Representatives is the permanent intergovernmental body of the Organization responsible for promoting the policies outlined by the Council of Ministers.³⁵

The General Secretariat consists of the Secretary General and Six Directorates. These are the Directorate for Industry, Tourism and Agriculture, for Trade and Investment, for Energy, Minerals and Ecology, for Transport and Communications, for Economic Research and Statistics, for Project Research. The Secretariat is responsible for supporting the membership and the Organization through the services of the Secretariat. The Secretariat is engaged in the initiation, implementation and monitoring of regional ECO projects and programs. ECO's external relations are also managed by the Secretariat.³⁶ The Secretary General shall be the overall Head of the Secretariat and shall be appointed by the Council of Ministers with a mandate of four years. According to "ECO Vision 2025" where the main directions of the ECO for the future are drawn member states recognize the need to strengthen the ECO Secretariat for the realization of their vision.³⁷

2.2.1 ECO subsidiary and affiliated bodies

The organization is assisted by its specialized agencies and regional institutions, as well as bodies affiliated to the Organization - ECO Trade & Development Bank; ECO Cultural Institute, ECO Science Foundation; ECO Educational Institute; ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry; ECO College of Insurance; ECO Regional Coordination Centre for Food Security; ECO Institute of Environmental Science and Technology; ECO Consultancy & Engineering Company; ECO Regional Centre for Risk Management of Natural Disasters; ECO Postal Staff College; ECO Seed Association; ECO Reinsurance Company.³⁸

2.3 The way of decision making within the Economic Cooperation Organisation

The method of voting in ECO is based on the principle of - one state, one vote. Decisions

33 *Treaty of Izmir*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 1996, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3512/1499586597300jk8s96cm6jnohhj2556coont44.pdf

34 "Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO]", Available at: https://www.eco.int/general_content/85363-Regional-Planning-Council-RPC.html?l=General-content

35 "Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO]", Available at: https://www.eco.int/general_content/85364-Council-of-Permanent-Representatives-CPR.html?l=General-content

36 "Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO]", Available at: https://www.eco.int/general_content/85365-Secretariat.html?l=General-content

37 *ECO Vision 2025 & Implementation Framework (Annexure)*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3624/1506486491201cfnbtm0acra83f5arho4dgc65.pdf

38 "Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO]", Available at: https://www.eco.int/general_content/85066-ECO-subsidiary-and-affiliated-bodies.html?l=General-content

on important issues are made unanimously, otherwise, only a simple majority is needed. These rules apply and are the same for all ECO bodies. Decisions requiring unanimity are defined by the Izmir Treaty and relate to vital issues in the work of the Organization - admission of new members or observers or partners in dialogue, budgetary arrangements, issues with financial implications, the appointment of the Secretary General, adoption of economic strategies and action plans, Treaty changes and ECO external relations. Also, those decisions that the Council of Ministers may deem vital to the Organization shall be adopted unanimously.³⁹

Decisions made by the Council of Ministers are binding on member states.⁴⁰

2.4 Goals, principles and achievements of the Organization

The ECO was created as an intergovernmental economic cooperation mechanism to promote multi-dimensional regional collaboration with a vision to achieve sustained socio-economic progress among the member states. Based on that, all the member states have been gradually reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers to promote intra-regional trade.⁴¹ Starting from all legal acts and documents of the Organization, as well as the practical behaviour of member states, it is noticed that expanding trade cooperation between the Member States is one of the most important and priority areas of cooperation i.e. the most important instrument for promoting regional cooperation to provide freer access to each other's market. In addition to trade and the need to mobilize the region's natural and human resources most efficiently, a significant place in the cooperation of member states belongs to transportation and communication.⁴²

As already mentioned, especially since the enlargement in 1992, the ECO's main areas of cooperation are trade and investment, transport, the building of road and rail links, telecommunications, energy, interconnection of power grids in the region, environmental issues, industry and agriculture.⁴³ More detailed, according to Article II of the ECO Charter (Izmir Treaty), the main objectives of the Organisation are:

“To promote conditions for sustainable economic development and to raise on this basis the standard of living and quality of life in the Member States through mobilization of economic and social potentials of the region; to take measures towards progressive removal of trade barriers within ECO region and expansion of intra and inter-regional trade, keeping in view experiences in other regions and global economic trends; to pursue, in line with the basic aspirations of the Member States, increased economic

39 *Treaty of Izmir*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 1996, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3512/1499586597300jk8s96cm6jnohhj2556coont44.pdf; *The Rules Of Procedure*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 2021, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3404/1618999368259a6gmraf6g071c5jic91sljkds1.pdf

40 *The Rules Of Procedure* (Chapter 8.), Economic Cooperation Organization, 2021, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3404/1618999368259a6gmraf6g071c5jic91sljkds1.pdf

41 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, “Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives”, *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 2015, p. 14037.

42 S. Ilkin, “The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) - A Short Note”, The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, Available at: <https://sesricdiag.blob.core.windows.net/sesric-site-blob/files/article/32.pdf>, p. 5.

43 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, “Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives”, *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 2015, p. 14037.

cooperation in order to secure greater role and contribution of ECO region to the growth of world trade and removal of iniquitous trading policies resulting in adverse terms of trade for the developing countries, particularly for the Member States; to provide for gradual and smooth integration of the economies of the Member States with the World Economy to ensure their fuller participation in the globalization process; to promote active regional collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to accelerate development of transport and communications infrastructures; linking the Member States with each other and with the outside world; to promote integration of public and private sector activities with emphasis on economic liberalization and privatization towards increased participation of the private sector in the regional economic development through joint ventures and investments; to develop joint programmes for human resource development in ECO region; to intensify mobilization and utilization of ECO region's natural resources in particular energy resources; To enhance efforts for effective utilization of the agricultural and industrial potentials of ECO region; To develop regional cooperation to eradicate drug abuse; To facilitate cooperation in the fields of ecological and environmental protection within the region; to promote mutually beneficial interaction and cooperation between ECO and other regional and international organizations as well as financial institutions; To further strengthen historical and cultural ties among the peoples of the ECO region as well as exchanges in the field of tourism".⁴⁴

Relying on the concept of regional-based mutual respect, equality, territorial integrity, sovereignty, political independence and principles of non-interference in the internal matters of the member countries one of the main aims of the Organisation is to provide landlocked members such as the Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan, access to open seas via Iran to the Oman Sea and the Persian Gulf, via Pakistan to the Indian Ocean and via Turkey to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁵

ECO priorities and objectives for each sector are defined in the following Documents:

- Quetta Plan of Action
- Istanbul Declaration
- Almaty Outline Plan
- ECO Vision 2015
- Framework Agreement on ECO Cooperation (ECOFAT)
- ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA)⁴⁶

44 Treaty of Izmir, Economic Cooperation Organization, 1996, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3512/1499586597300jk8s96cm6jnohhj2556coont44.pdf

45 F. Javaid, M. A. Khan, "The Role of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Central Asia: An analytical study", *Wifaqiyen*, vol. 1. No.2, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Karachi, 2015, p. 64; R. Pomfret, "The Economic Cooperation Organization: Current Status and Future Prospects", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, DOI: 10.1080/09668139708412465, Routledge, 1997, p. 664.

46 ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), the flagship preferential trade agreement of the Organization, was signed by five Member States - the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of Tajikistan and Republic of Turkey and was ratified during 2004-2008. Areas Agreement covers: tariff reduction, non-tariff barriers (NTBs), trade facilitation, dispute settlement, trade defence, intellectual property rights. *Non-Paper on Benefits of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) for The Islamic Republic of Iran*, Economic Cooperation Organisation, 2019, Available at: <https://eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/elib/55/1571218556225cappssqv4hp9cqt6nvq0tcd20.pdf>, p. 1

- Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA)⁴⁷
- ECO Vision 2025
- Ashgabat Consensus for Action (2021)⁴⁸

Total exports of the region in 2018 were 393 billion USD whereas the imports are 411 billion USD, cumulatively making a total of 804 billion USD. Intra-regional trade is 65 billion USD which turns out to be 8 per cent of the region's global trade.⁴⁹ By the end of 2020, the total volume of trade between the ECO countries reached about 49.8 billion dollars.⁵⁰ The trade amongst ECO countries in 2017 has decreased to 7.6 per cent of the total trade of the Member States. Within ECO, the top exporters are Turkey, Kazakhstan, Iran, Pakistan, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, which make up 94 per cent of ECO's total exports.⁵¹ The ECO countries received foreign direct investment of about US\$ 36.5 in 2016.⁵²

Currently, ECO has 54 projects in various areas, some of which have already been completed, some are ongoing, and some are planned for implementation. Some of the more significant completed and ongoing projects in the areas of Transport & Communications and Trade & Investments are:⁵³

1. Project "ECO Road Transport Corridors between: Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) and Kyrgyz Republic-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran (KTAI)" (Completed 2020)

2. Project "Railway between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran (KTI Railway)" (Completed 2020)

47 M. Ali, N. Mujahid, "Analytical Study of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): Challenges and Perspectives", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 11, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12884.35203, 2015, p. 14040.

48 According to the Document, the member states agreed:

„to expand interstate ties in trade, transport and communication, energy, tourism, economic growth and productivity, in the social field and in the sphere of environmental protection; to strengthen the fight against the coronavirus pandemic; to simplify the procedures for trade and investment; to consider the issue of joining the Treaty of Izmir; to remove technical and functional barriers to intraregional trade; to expand communication capabilities; to commend the cargo transportation from Pakistan to Azerbaijan and Turkey; to overcome the digital inequality in the region; to digitize transport, customs and border procedures using e-TIR / e-CMR; to strengthen interaction in e-government, digital economy, AI; to take urgent measures to solve serious problems in the tourism industry that have arisen amid the coronavirus pandemic; to expand work on environmental protection; to support the initiative to create a Clean Energy Centre; to increase cooperation in «green» energy; to ensure food security in the region, in particular in cooperation with FAO; to expand industrial partnership; to enhance the role of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in economic growth; to consider the issues of creating a Regional Electricity Market; to strengthen the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism, money laundering; to stop unilateral sanctions and economic pressure; to study investment opportunities in the field of restoration of several territories of Azerbaijan; to support ensuring the peace in Afghanistan, to recognize Pakistan's efforts to facilitate the transfer of a bank account to Kabul, to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, to support immigrants from an Islamic country, to emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive government in the relevant state, to show solidarity in protecting the rights of Afghan women." "Ashgabat Consensus for Actions adopted at ECO Summit in Turkmenistan", *CentralAsia.news*, November 30, 2021, Available at: <https://centralasia.news/12536-ashgabat-consensus-for-actions-adopted-at-eco-summit-in-turkmenistan.html>

49 *Non-Paper on Benefits of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) for The Islamic Republic of Iran*, Economic Cooperation Organization, 2019, Available at: <https://eco.int//parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/elib/55/1571218556225capppsqv4hp9cact6nvq0tcd20.pdf>, p. 2.

50 "Ashgabat Consensus for Actions adopted at ECO Summit in Turkmenistan", *CentralAsia.news*, November 30, 2021, Available at: <https://centralasia.news/12536-ashgabat-consensus-for-actions-adopted-at-eco-summit-in-turkmenistan.html>

51 A. Muhammad, "ECO Vision 2025: An overview", *ECO Secretariat Staff Papers*, The Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, p. 4.

52 *Ibidem*.

53 Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO], Available at: https://eco.int//parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3819/160939471135890o3a3r9nv1skrhqh4c34f03.pdf; https://eco.int//parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3819/160939471370390o3a3r9nv1skrhqh4c34f03.pdf

3. Project “ECO Container Train on Islamabad Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) route” (Completed 2020)
4. Project “ECO Container Train on Istanbul-Almaty and Bandar Abbas-Almaty routes” (Completed 2020)
5. Project “Strengthening Cooperation amongst Public and Private Sectors in the ECO Region” (Ongoing)
6. Project “Study is to explore the possibility of forming ECO Clearing Union” (Ongoing)
7. Project “ECO Regional Payment System (ERPS) Feasibility Study- Phase-I for setting up ECO Clearing Union” (Ongoing)
8. Project “Study on Impediments to Enhancing International and Intra-Regional Trade in the ECO Region and Policy Measures to Realize its Potential” (Ongoing)

According to the ECO Vision 2025 main principles for future cooperation within the ECO mechanism are Sustainability, Integration and a Conducive economic environment. Based on the mentioned principles, the cooperation of the member states will be realized in the areas of trade, transport and connectivity, energy, tourism, economic growth and productivity, social welfare and environment.⁵⁴

3. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation – SAARC

3.1 Origin and history of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is an organization of South Asian nations, which was established in 1985 when the government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka formally adopted its Charter. This process of regional cooperation was initiated by the President of Bangladesh, Zia ur Rehman, in the 1980s. To that end, he also published a document “Regional Cooperation in South Asia” focusing on the possible areas for regional cooperation.⁵⁵ During his visit to the countries in the region of South Asia in the late seventies and early eighties, he presented a proposal for the institutionalization of regional cooperation between these countries which would rely on „collective self-reliance in a common quest for peace and development of all these countries”.⁵⁶ The idea of South Asian Regional Cooperation was first mooted in May 1980. It was followed by Foreign Secretaries of seven countries meeting for the first time in Colombo in April 1981 namely India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Although the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka welcomed the proposal, Pakistan and India made their reservations, but eventually agreed to join

54 ECO Vision 2025 & Implementation Framework (Annexure), Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3624/1506486491201cflnbtm0acra83f5arho4dgc65.pdf; A. Muhammad, “ECO Vision 2025: An overview”, *ECO Secretariat Staff Papers*, The Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017, p. 7.

55 M. Muzaffar, I. Jathol, Z. Yaseen, “SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures, and Compulsion for Cooperation”, *Global Political Review (GPR)*, Vol. II, No. I, DOI: 10.31703/gpr.2017(II-I).04, 2017, p. 40

56 T. Mahmood, “SAARC and Regional Politics”, *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 2000, p. 8.

the forum.⁵⁷ Foreign Secretaries of the South Asian countries met in Colombo (1981) for the first time and identified five areas of cooperation - Agriculture, Rural Development, Telecommunications, Meteorology, and Health and Population Activities.⁵⁸

As a consequence of a large number of meetings at the level of foreign ministers, the Declaration of Delhi was adopted in 1983, which served as the basis for the formulation of the Charter of this Organization. The first summit was held in Dhaka in December 1985. Its seven founding members were Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh while Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. SAARC also includes nine observers including the European Union, the US, Iran and China.

According to some authors, India was reserved towards this type of regional organization because it would allow smaller states to unite and thus limit India's influence in South Asia.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Pakistan saw in this only another mechanism that would probably further strengthen India's political position in the region. In any case, India could not afford the risk of remaining outside the regional grouping that would include Pakistan, and Pakistan had to be an active member of the regional grouping to somehow restrain Indian ambitions as much as possible.⁶⁰

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was created as a forum to discuss issues related to economic cooperation, peace, development and progress in the region with the alleviation of poverty in all South Asian Countries as the highest priority. The Organization laid down the aims and objectives, which are:

"to promote the welfare of the South Asian people and to improve their living standards; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials; to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the South Asian countries; to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of each other's problems; to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests and on co-operation with other developing countries of the world; to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes."⁶¹

3.2 SAARC Organizational Structure

Within SAARC, there are several levels of decision-making as well as levels of implementation

57 Ibidem; India decided to join the regional grouping after ensuring that 'unanimity on decisions at all levels, exclusion of bilateral and contentious issues, and unanimous approval for external assistance or intervention' form the basic principles of the regional forum. K. Yhomer, T. S. Maini, "Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond", *ORF Occasional Paper 135*, Observer Research Foundation, 2017, p. 7; B. L. Raj. "SARC, But No 'SHARK': South Asian Regional Cooperation in Perspective." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 58, no. 3, DOI:10.2307/2759238, Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia, 1985, p. 411.

58 SAARC At A Glance, SAARC Secretariat, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2018.

59 T. Delinić, "SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, 2011, p. 10.

60 T. Mahmood, "SAARC and Regional Politics", *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 2000, p. 8.

61 Ibidem, p. 10.

and enforcement of decisions as parts of the SAARC organisational structure and these are: Summits, Council of Ministers, Standing Committee, Technical Committee, Programming Committee, and Secretariat.

The Meetings of the Heads of State or Government of Member States is the highest decision-making authority under SAARC. Summits are usually held biennially hosted by a Member State in alphabetical order. The Member State hosting the Summit assumes the Chair of the Association. The key outcome of a SAARC Summit is a Declaration. The Summit Declaration contains decisions and directives of the Leaders to strengthen and consolidate regional cooperation in different areas being pursued under the auspices of SAARC. The Declaration is adopted by the Leaders at the concluding session of a Summit. The Summit also considers and approves reports of the Council of Ministers and Ministerial Meetings. During the Summit, policy statements on regional cooperation under SAARC are made by the Leaders. The Summit is also addressed by Heads of Observer delegations and by the Secretary General.⁶²

Council of Ministers (COM) comprises of the Ministers of Foreign/External Affairs of the Member States. Ministers from various departments meet several times a year to draw up political plans, assess the effects of previous actions, identify new areas for cooperation and if necessary decide upon new methods and mechanisms. These meetings were originally intended for the countries' foreign ministers, but other ministries are increasingly being included.⁶³ As provided in Article V of the Charter, the Council undertakes: formulation of policies of the Association; review of the progress of cooperation under SAARC; decision on new areas of cooperation; establishment of the additional mechanism under SAARC, as deemed necessary; and decision on other matters of general interest to SAARC. The Council meets, preceding the Summit and between the two summits. The Council reviews the progress of implementation of decisions taken by Summits. The reports of the Council of Ministers are submitted to the Meeting of Heads of State or Government for consideration/approval.⁶⁴

The Standing Committee comprises of the Foreign Secretaries of the SAARC Member States. As provided in Article V of the SAARC Charter, they take measures /decisions relating to: overall monitoring and coordination of programme of cooperation under different areas; approval of projects and programmes, including modalities of their financing; determination of inter-sectoral priorities; mobilisation of regional and external resources; and identification of new areas of cooperation based on appropriate studies.⁶⁵ Standing Committee is mandated to meet as often as necessary. Generally, they have met preceding the sessions of the Council of Ministers i.e. both during the Summit as also as the Council is convened in between two Summits. Depending on the special requirement, Standing Committee has met at Special Sessions, on a stand-alone basis. The Committee reports to the Council of Ministers, on regular matters; and, as needed, asks for the specific decision on policy matters from the Council. The Standing Committee may set up Action Committees

62 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], Available at: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/saarc-structure/saarc-summits>

63 T. Delinić, "SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, 2011, p. 13.

64 *Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation*, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], Available at: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/saarc-charter/34-saarc-charter>

65 Ibidem

comprising the Member States concerned with the implementation of projects involving more than two Member States.⁶⁶

Technical Committees comprising representatives of Member States are responsible for the implementation, coordination and monitoring of the programmes in their respective areas of cooperation. In addition to determining the potential and the scope of regional cooperation in agreed areas, Technical Committees are involved in the formulation of programmes and preparation of projects. They also coordinate the implementation of sectorial programmes and assess the implementation regularly. The following Technical Committees work on their respective areas to provide support to SAARC activities: Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development; Technical Committee on Health and Population Activities; Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children; Technical Committee on Science and Technology; Technical Committee on Transport; Technical Committee on Environment.⁶⁷

The Programming Committee comprising of the Heads of SAARC Divisions of Member States was set up by the Fifth Session of the Standing Committee in 1985 to assist the Standing Committee. The Programming Committee meets before the Sessions of the Standing Committee as its preparatory body. The Committee is also to meet independently at least twice a year, and as and when deemed necessary. The Fortieth Session of the Standing Committee in 2014 granted Charter Body status to the Programming Committee. The Programming Committee considers the Calendar of Activities; Administrative and Financial Matters of the Secretariat and Regional Centres, Technical Committees, Working Groups, and Specialized Bodies.⁶⁸

The role of the Secretariat is to coordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities and to service the meetings of the Organisation. The Secretariat is composed of Secretary General, and Professional and General Services Staff, and contain an appropriate number of Divisions. The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary General of SAARC appointed for a non-renewable term of three years by the SAARC Council of Ministers upon nomination by a Member State on the principle of rotation in alphabetical order. The Secretary General is assisted by eight Directors.⁶⁹ The Secretary General, as head of the SAARC Secretariat, is responsible for conducting the work of the Secretariat including coordination and monitoring of SAARC activities. Other functions and powers of the Secretariat are to submit Staff Rules and Financial Regulations to the Standing Committee for approval of the Council of Ministers; act as the channel of communication and linkage between SAARC and other international organizations on matters of mutual interest; assist in organization and preparation of SAARC meetings at the levels of Standing Committee, Council of Ministers; submit the Annual Budget of the Secretariat to the Standing Committee for approval of the Council of Ministers; act as the custodian of all SAARC documents and publications and others.⁷⁰

66 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], Available at: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/saarc-structure/standing-committee>

67 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], Available at: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/saarc-structure/technical-committees>

68 SAARC At A Glance, SAARC Secretariat, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2018.

69 Ibidem

70 A. B. Tharpa, "Compilation Of SAARC Charter/Conventions/Agreements 1985 - 2016", SAARC Secretary General, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2016, p. 10-11

3.2.1 SAARC Specialized Bodies

- SAARC Development Fund (SDF)
- South Asian University (SAU)
- SAARC Arbitration Council
- South Asian Regional Standards Organization

SAARC *Regional Centres*: SAARC Agriculture Centre, SAARC Tuberculosis & HIV/AIDS Centre, SAARC Energy Centre, SAARC Cultural Centre.⁷¹

3.3 The way of decision making within the SAARC

The charter of SAARC has the provision of not discussing the contentious and bilateral disputes, so the Charter categorically excludes controversial bilateral issues from the SAARC and requires that all the decisions will be taken unanimously.⁷² Therefore, all decisions within the Association are made unanimously with the required quorum of all member states. SAARC's institutional structure delegates more decision-making authority to the Council of Ministers, which is tasked with formulating policies, reviewing progress, and identifying and deciding on new cooperation areas and institutional mechanisms. Because the Charter does not specify the roles and functions of the SAARC Summit, Nguyen points out that Summit is largely ceremonial while actual decision-making authority is delegated to the Council of Ministers.⁷³ SAARC organization does not delegate decision-making authority to supranational institutions.⁷⁴

3.4 Goals, principles and achievements of the Organization

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was created as an intergovernmental cooperation mechanism to create a regional community to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through cooperation in the agreed areas of interest. The Organization was founded to promote welfare and to improve the quality of life of the people of the region.⁷⁵ SAARC is a state-led institutional arrangement and the first formal regional institution of South Asia.⁷⁶

Cooperation within the SAARC framework is based on the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other

71 SAARC *At A Glance*, SAARC Secretariat, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2018.

72 T. Delinić, "SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, 2011, p. 11

73 C. M. Nguyen, „Institutional Capacity Building for South Asian Integration“, in Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 479.

74 Ibidem

75 A. B. Tharpa, "Compilation Of SAARC Charter/Conventions/Agreements 1985 - 2016", SAARC Secretary General, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2016, p. 1.

76 C. M. Nguyen, „Institutional Capacity Building for South Asian Integration“, in Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 472

States and mutual benefit where such cooperation is to complement and not to substitute bilateral or multilateral cooperation and such cooperation is consistent with bilateral and multilateral obligations of the member states.⁷⁷

The areas of cooperation identified by SAARC are: Agriculture and Rural Development; Biotechnology; Blue Economy; Children Welfare; Communications; Connectivity; Cooperatives; Economic and Trade; Education and Culture; Energy; Environment, Forestry and Natural Disasters; Finance; Food Security; Gender Equality; Health and Population; Human Resource Development; Human Trafficking; Information and Media; Meteorology; Migration; People-to-People Contacts; Postal Service; Poverty Alleviation; Science and Technology; Scholarship and Fellowship; Security; Social Development; Tourism; Transport; and Women Empowerment.⁷⁸

Regional integration in South Asia gained momentum in 1995 when the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed later resulting in the creation of the Free Trade Agreement now known as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). SAFTA, which came into force in January 2006, provides a framework for trade liberalization and phased tariff reductions by SAARC member states to bring down tariffs⁷⁹. The South Asian Free Trade Association (SAFTA) seeks to remove trade barriers, phased elimination of tariffs and establishment of a ministerial-level mechanism for administering the treaty and dispute settlement among members.

The Objectives of the SAFTA Agreement are to promote and enhance mutual trade and economic cooperation among the Contracting States by:

“eliminating barriers to trade in, and facilitating the cross-border movement of goods between the territories of the Contracting States; promoting conditions of fair competition in the free trade area, and ensuring equitable benefits to all Contracting States, taking into account their respective levels and pattern of economic development; creating an effective mechanism for the implementation and application of this Agreement, for its joint administration and for the resolution of disputes; and establishing a framework for further regional cooperation to expand and enhance the mutual benefits of this Agreement”.⁸⁰

Despite the signed SAFTA Agreement intraregional trade still accounts for only 4%–5% of the members’ total trade. India accounts for 65% of the region’s total exports, Pakistan accounts for 21% while Afghanistan and the Maldives together account for only about 1%. In terms of imports, Sri Lanka accounts for 24% of total intraregional imports, followed by Bangladesh at 22%. Bhutan and the Maldives account for only 1% of total imports by

77 “SAARC: Its Evolution, Objectives, Constraints/Challenges and Prospects”, Available at: <http://seramporegirlscollege.org/dept/upload/Political%20Science/SAARC.pdf>, p. 118.

78 “SAARC: Its Evolution, Objectives, Constraints/Challenges and Prospects”, Available at: <http://seramporegirlscollege.org/dept/upload/Political%20Science/SAARC.pdf>, p. 132; SAARC At A Glance, SAARC Secretariat, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2018.

79 P. Ojha, “Driving SAFTA: A Myth or Reality?” in: Tomislav Delinic, Nishchal N. Pandey (Eds.), SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation, Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2012, pp. 34-51.

80 Agreement On South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Available at: <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/resources/agreements-conventions/36-agreement-on-south-asian-free-trade-area-safta/file>

SAARC member countries.⁸¹ One of the major obstacles to the formal and institutionalized economic integration of the SAARC region is the high level of informal trade which is one of the substantive characteristics of this region. It turned out that many business companies from these countries are more willing to invest and trade with the countries of Southeast Asia, China, America and the EU than with their neighbours. Also, bilateral cooperation is more developed than the one within the multilateral Association.⁸²

The SAARC Convention of Terrorism and the Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, provide a legal framework for countries in the region to cooperate more closely on these matters.⁸³ The SAARC Convention on the suppression of Terrorism was signed in 1987. Later the Additional Protocol on Terrorism was signed. The SAARC Standing Committee after 9/11, recommended at its Twenty-Eighth Session that Legal Advisers of SAARC Member State Prepare a draft of an Additional Protocol to the SAARC Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism.⁸⁴ The Additional Protocol on Terrorism was adopted in 2005 after much debate and discussion on the definition of terrorism. Cooperation has been confined to bilateral initiatives - SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) and SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk (SDOMD).⁸⁵

The IPA is an important programme of the SAARC process and includes 12 areas of cooperation, each being covered by a designated Technical Committee. The Secretary-General reports to the Standing Committee on the progress in the enforcement of IPA. The Standing Committee also reviews the institutional mechanisms and the functioning of the Technical Committees, their mandate and also evaluating the role of the Secretariat. The various committees working under IPA are as follows: Agriculture Technical committee, Communications; Education, Culture and Sports; Environment; Health, Population Activities and Child Welfare; Meteorology; Prevention of Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse; Rural Development; Science and Technology; Tourism; Transport; Women in Development.⁸⁶

The establishment of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) in 1992 was another important initiative to promote business collaboration and to advise SAARC bodies on matters of economic interest. Its membership includes almost all major national chambers of the South Asian countries.⁸⁷

This cooperation can be witnessed in the establishment and initiation of various programs and forums for mutual benefits;

81 S. Raihan, F. B. Ferdous, and Md. A. Rahim, "Trade Performance and Potential in South Asia" in: Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 24.

82 N. Taneja and R. Saini, "Informal Trade in South Asia", in: Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, pp. 89-118.

83 M. Shankar, "SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation", in: Tomislav Delinic, Nishchal N. Pandey (Eds.), *SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation*, Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2012, p. 32.

84 A. S. Hashmi, "Envisioning a Regional Security Community: Challenges and Prospects in South Asia", in: Tomislav Delinic, Nishchal N. Pandey (Eds.), *SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation*, Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2012, p. 89.

85 I. Shaheen, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Its Role, Hurdles and Prospects", *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 15, Issue 6, DOI: 10.9790/0837-1560109, 2013, p. 3.

86 I. Shaheen, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Its Role, Hurdles and Prospects", *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 15, Issue 6, DOI: 10.9790/0837-1560109, 2013, p. 4.

87 P. Ojha, "Driving SAFTA: A Myth or Reality?" in: Tomislav Delinic, Nishchal N. Pandey (Eds.), *SAARC: Towards Meaningful Cooperation*, Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2012, p. 38.

- South Asian University
- SAARC International College
- Agreement on Judicial Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism
- Establishment of Food Bank
- Establishment of Development Funds
- Telemedicine Network
- SAARC Writers and Literature Foundation
- South Asia Foundation
- South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme
- South Asia Centre for Policy Studies
- South Asia Women's Centre
- South Asia Olympic Council (South Asian Games)

In 1997 involving four SAARC nations (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) to enhance regional solidarity and to promote overall development within SAARC the first sub-regional mechanism was created called South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) with an emphasis on project-based development and did not aim to establish a common market. In 2000, the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme in the SAGQ was launched with assistance from Asian Development Bank (ADB).⁸⁸ Actually, these four countries requested the assistance of the Asian Development Bank in facilitating their economic cooperation initiative which led to the implementation of the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC).⁸⁹

SAARC priorities and objectives for each area of mutual interest are defined in the following documents, agreements and conventions⁹⁰:

- Social Charter
- Agreement for Establishment of SAARC Arbitration Council
- Agreement For Establishment Of South Asian University
- Charter Of The SAARC Development Fund (SDF)
- Agreement on the Establishment of South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO)
- SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism
- SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances
- SAARC Convention on Regional Agreements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia
- SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution
- Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism
- SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters
- SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment
- Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve

88 K. Yhome, T. S. Maini, "Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond", *ORF Occasional Paper 135*, Observer Research Foundation, 2017, p. 8

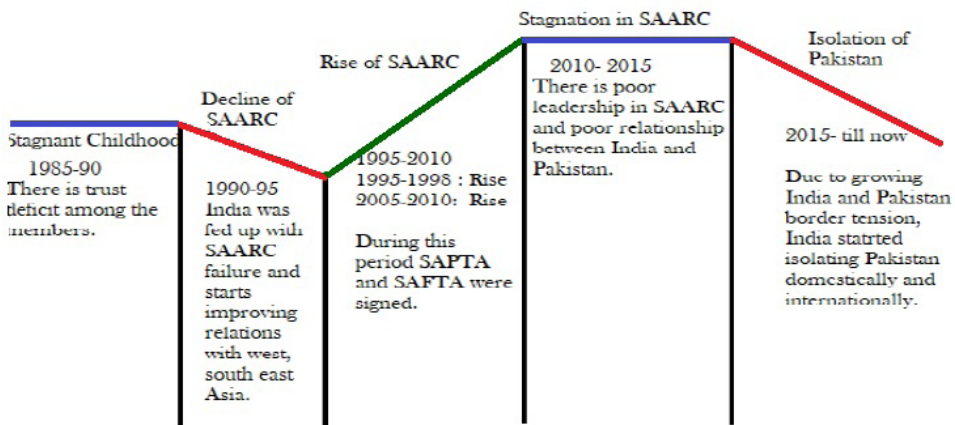
89 C. M. Nguyen, "Institutional Capacity Building for South Asian Integration", in Selim Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 494.

90 A. B. Tharpa, "Compilation Of SAARC Charter/Conventions/Agreements 1985 - 2016", SAARC Secretary General, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2016.

- Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA)
- Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)
- SAARC Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters
- SAARC Limited Multilateral Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters
- Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Bank
- SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS)
- SAARC Agreement on Multilateral Arrangement on Recognition of Conformity Assessment
- Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Seed Bank
- SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters
- SAARC Agreement on Implementation of Regional Standards

Also, SAARC leaders approved the SAARC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) at the fifteenth SAARC Summit in 2008.

Graph 1. Stages of SAARC development (1985-2017)



Source: M. Muzaffar, I. Jathol, Z. Yaseen, "SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures, and Compulsion for Cooperation", *Global Political Review (GPR)*, Vol. II, No. I, DOI: 10.31703/gpr.2017(II-I).04, 2017, p. 40 (Edited by the Author)

The possible formation of the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) is seen as the outcome of the regional integration of the SAARC region. As stated in the Study on Regional Economic Integration (Phase II) Commissioned by the SAARC Secretariat - Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union: "to give effect to the shared aspirations for a more prosperous South Asia, the Leaders agreed to the vision of a phased and planned process eventually leading to a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU)".⁹¹

⁹¹ S. Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013.

4. Conclusion

The political and ideational character of the ECO and SAARC region is a major and essential feature of them both in terms of whether they will be more or less integrated. In that sense, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have never been effective regional organizations such as the European Union, African Union, ASEAN and similar regional organizations. Even though the members of ECO have the same culture, religion, historical background and similar or the same problems with economic development - this applies to some extent to the countries of the SAARC region - both of them remains one of the least integrated regions in the world with low volumes of intra-regional integration especially in the areas of trade and investment. As we saw South Asia and the ECO region have low levels of economic and especially political integration and they remain slow in enhancing wider regional integration. Regional cooperation is further constrained by the slow removal of numerous non-tariff barriers. This is especially true for the SAARC region.

Both of these regions are burdened with major, primarily political issues - conflicts and instability within the region, religious, ethnic, economic and border disputes - which are slowing down or preventing the strengthening of economic cooperation and integration and holding back realisation of comprehensive trade, security, energy and infrastructure cooperation arrangements, as well as the possibility of establishing a common regional identity. They are affected by extreme poverty, the disparity between rich and poor, unemployment, problems with underdeveloped infrastructure and energy connectivity, inflationary pressure and poor intra-regional trade. Intra-regional trade continues to account for less than 5% of formal trade of the eight member countries of SAARC.⁹²

On the one hand, globalization has stimulated progress in regional networking, but on the other, global, regional and domestic turbulences have influenced the progress of regional economic cooperation negatively. The world had seen one of the worst economic crises in 2009 and the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic was the one to cause a decline of -50.9 % in February 2020 over January 2020 in the four reported countries i.e. Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan.⁹³ Given both regions are rich in resources, as well as that they have an important geostrategic position, they individually, as well as their bilateral and multilateral arrangements, are subject to the interests of major global players. Regional issues that are slowing down the cooperation are internal division, the lack of shared strategic interests, the influence of historical circumstances, an asymmetry between member states, the difference in the perception of sensitive issues, lack of mutual trust and understanding and many others. In the domestic political context of member states, political systems and intrastate political and economic instability, nationalism is also of major importance to the successful functioning of mentioned regional mechanisms.

Despite these obstacles, we have seen in the paper that both regions and their member states have achieved a certain success providing a forum and a platform for member states representatives to meet and discuss important issues of common interest which might not

92 S. Raihan (Ed.) *Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union - A Study On Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)*, Asian Development Bank, 2013.

93 *Impact of Covid 19 on global trade and Investment*, ECO Secretariat, Economic Cooperation Organization, 2020, Available at: https://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3870/16136600906501104a4euis0895hovg1e8cj683.pdf

otherwise have been addressed. Both organizations have made some progress and efforts in signing a set of documents, agreements, declarations and legal acts related to various areas in the efforts on intensifying cooperation, strengthening their institutions and decision-making bodies, drafting and implementing projects.

As can be seen in the paper, the last Summits held by both organizations indicate that there is a political will and commitment to regional cooperation, but also that new challenges are lying ahead. The common for both Organisations will be the issue of Afghanistan.

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