



## Conflict management strategy: What SAARC can learn from ASEAN?

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### Abstract

ASEAN is widely One of the most popular promising examinations in developing-world a regional collaboration, notably in terms of its ability to resolve conflicts and uphold peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The SAARC, its South Asian counterpart, is viewed as a defunct organisation that hasn't done much to promote cooperation and concord in the area. Regionalism is unique to its own country, posing a unique set of problems that each regional grouping must resolve by developing appropriate conflict management and regional cooperation models. In that sense, ASEAN is unique, as is the way it does business. Although the experiences of one organisation cannot be completely transferred or when used on another, it is helpful. to take into account the reason and complexity of every field in order to gain the proper conclusions. Certain angles of collaboration in a sector may be deserving of imitation in other if modified in correct political and socioeconomic sense. This article delves into fields where SAARC may profit from ASEAN's involvement in striving to develop an environment of politics favourable to boosting regional partnership in economic and political affairs, despite apparent differences in geopolitical and economic makeup.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, regional organizations, southeast Asia, conflict management, regional cooperation, SAARC

### Introduction

In the field of international affairs, regionalism has been making gradual progress. Regional entities have emerged as integral platforms for fostering alliances for security and defence, advancing economic growth and technical advancements, and mitigating the prevalence and severity of regional conflicts in developing nations. In light of the escalating intra-state disputes and inadequacies of the UN's reaction to post-Cold War demands for peacekeeping, and the function of regional organisations in upholding regional peace and stability is of paramount significance <sup>[1]</sup>.

For the initial three decades of its existence, ASEAN was widely acknowledged as a highly promising initiative in regional collaboration among developing nations, primarily due to its effectiveness in conflict management and the preservation of peace and security in the region. However, the institution was plagued by crises in the late 1990s, and it faced heavy criticism for its role in the 1997 economic crisis, forest fires, smog, and its failure to resolve the East Timor situation in 1999. Despite these difficulties, ASEAN is still a model regional organisation for those in the developing countries when it comes to intra- and inter-regional collaboration.

The SAARC presents a contrasting picture to ASEAN, as the former has struggled to achieve significant economic progress and has been marred by persistent political animosity and distrust that have impeded regional development. It is essential for the region to explore all available options to enhance political understanding and minimize conflicts, as this is crucial for SAARC to establish itself as a credible regional organization. The development of effective tools for resolving disputes and promoting mutual trust among South Asian countries is crucial to enable SAARC to realize its full potential. Only then can SAARC overcome the challenges it faces and establish itself

as a regional organization that can effectively address the region's economic and political issues.

Regionalism is inherently context-specific, presenting distinct challenges that require specific solutions tailored to each regional body's needs. To address these challenges, it is essential to develop appropriate conflict management and regional cooperation models that are responsive to the unique socioeconomic, cultural, and political landscape of the region. ASEAN's approach to regionalism is shaped by its geographical location and cultural experience, which makes it challenging to replicate in other regions. However, solutions developed to tackle issues in one region can be adapted and applied to another region if they are tailored to the specific socioeconomic and political context. Therefore, it is crucial to learn from the experiences of successful regional bodies like ASEAN and adapt their models to suit the unique requirements of other regions <sup>[2]</sup>.

This article aims to achieve several goals. Firstly, it seeks to examine the growth of ASEAN as a regional organization and the conflict resolution mechanisms it has implemented to deal with issues between states in Southeast Asia. Secondly, it investigates the elements that have obstructed SAARC's development and hindered its ability to resolve regional conflicts effectively. Finally, the article investigates how SAARC can benefit from ASEAN's experience, despite the apparent geopolitical and economic disparities between the two regions. Specifically, the article considers how ASEAN's approach can help create a conducive environment for fostering bilateral confidence and cooperation in South Asia. By addressing these issues, the article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the unique challenges and opportunities facing regional bodies in their efforts to promote economic growth and political stability in their respective regions.

### Conflict management strategy in ASEAN

To address the challenges facing Southeast Asia at the time of its inception, ASEAN adopted a conflict management strategy that combined elements of conflict avoidance, conflict prevention, and conflict resolution<sup>[3]</sup>. Conflict avoidance involved steering clear of contentious issues that could spark conflicts among member states. This approach aimed to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place by avoiding sensitive topics that could inflame tensions between states

In contrast, conflict prevention involved taking proactive measures to prevent conflicts from escalating. ASEAN achieved this by promoting open communication channels and dialogue between member states, establishing confidence-building measures, and developing mechanisms for addressing disputes before they could escalate into full-blown conflicts.

Finally, ASEAN's conflict resolution strategy sought to resolve conflicts that had already arisen. This approach involved the use of negotiation, mediation, and other peaceful means to resolve disputes between member states. ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanisms included the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which brought together regional actors to discuss security issues and promote conflict resolution, as well as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which established a framework for peaceful coexistence among ASEAN member states.

Overall, ASEAN's conflict management strategy has been successful in promoting regional peace and stability. Despite occasional tensions between member states, the organization has managed to maintain a relatively peaceful and stable environment in Southeast Asia over the past few decades.

ASEAN was established after two previous attempts failed, namely the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASA) and MAPHILINDO. The Bangkok Declaration, which founded ASEAN in 1967, aimed to promote regional peace and stability through respect for justice, rule of law, and adherence to the United Nations Charter<sup>[4]</sup>. However, the emphasis was primarily on fostering social and economic cooperation rather than conflict resolution.

ASEAN's position as a regional organization became more established and its conflict-management abilities became apparent only after the 1976 Bali Summit. Major powers leaving Southeast Asia, communist victories in the Indo-China region in 1975, and concerns about Chinese backing for insurgencies there all heightened tensions and made non-communist countries aware of the pressing need for collaboration and friendly relations among themselves.

The resolution of conflicts within a region usually involves a combination of methods, including formal procedures that are broadly agreed upon and informal understandings among member countries about the importance and the need for collaboration, as well as a combination of both<sup>[5]</sup>. ASEAN's mechanisms for resolving conflicts include the framing of numerous declarations and communiqués, which serve as formal procedures. However, the region also employs informal procedures, which reflect two general trends: (a) achieving agreement through joint discussions and mediation to resolve disputes, and (b) postponing discussion of sensitive matters to do the same to reduce disputes<sup>[6]</sup>. These trends have been observed in the ASEAN region.

### Conflict management: formal mechanisms

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Declaration of the ASEAN Concord were both signed on February 24 at the Bali Conference. These two crucial texts served as the embodiment and expression of the Bangkok Declaration's goals. The ASEAN agreement officially recognized political cooperation as a priority for ASEAN, while the TAC replaced other management tools as the main one for ASEAN relations. The TAC was founded upon six fundamental principles, as outlined by the ASEAN Secretariat in 1988, reciprocal respect for all nations' national identities, as well as their independence, sovereignty, equality, and territorial integrity. Another tenet guaranteed each state's right to pursue its national life without outside influence, subversion, or force. In addition, the TAC upheld non-interference in one another's internal affairs, peaceful resolution of disputes, and the renunciation of the use or threat of force. The final principle emphasized effective cooperation among ASEAN member states.

### Conflict management: informal mechanisms

ASEAN has made use of informal channels to prevent confrontation in addition to formal declarations. On one hand, the group has resolved the region's divisive issues through dialogue and consensus, as well as by practicing self-restraint and transparency in their interactions. However, where consensus is not reached, ASEAN has made efforts to settle issues in order to reduce tensions, however decisions can take time or involve third parties.

### Agreement through consultation and negotiation

ASEAN conflict resolution relies on the musyawarah (consultation) and muafakat procedures, which emphasize consensus-building. Musyawarah refers to reaching a consensus by consultation and conversation, whilst muafakat speaks of agreement based on musyawarah. This decision-making style has its roots in village traditions in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and is successful in keeping the area free of conflict. It is based on a "distinct preference for personal relationships, informality, and an implicit show of politeness and patience."<sup>[7]</sup> A basic agreement is reached through informal discussions before being submitted to a formal meeting for approval.

The phase under consideration is generally protracted, yet its informality facilitates the establishment of stronger connections among the participants, enabling them to explore new avenues for potential communication and collaboration. Disputes are rarely made public, and silent diplomacy is employed. In addition, regardless of size or economic strength, all members are treated equally and have the freedom to express their opinions. Despite initial concerns and differences in economic strategies among ASEAN members (Singapore has consistently supported open trade, whereas Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, with larger but less prosperous economies, have upheld hefty trade and tariff barriers to entry), this method of deliberation and reaching consensus has been successful in a number of circumstances, including the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA)<sup>[8]</sup>.

Another vital facet of ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanism is Indonesia's self-restraint policy as the dominant force in the region. In actuality, Indonesia held a dominant position in Southeast Asia during ASEAN's inception, with over half of the population of ASEAN as a

whole. However, Indonesia's deliberate policy of refraining from controlling the organization played a crucial role in alleviating any apprehensions that the participant countries may have regarding a more substantial self-like power. By relinquishing its leadership position, Indonesia effectively prevented disagreements and divisions within ASEAN [9].

#### **Conflict diffusion through deferring controversial issues**

ASEAN employs an additional dispute resolution approach that prioritizes issues of mutual interest, as they present a greater opportunity for appeasement. Deliberations on difficult and contentious matters that are unlikely to produce outcomes are postponed. This method is particularly advantageous in cases of a standoff since, instead of adopting a confrontational stance, ASEAN members agree to disagree, allowing them to sidestep unproductive quarrels and buy time [10]. If viewed as an effective cooling-off mechanism, silence and postponement can avert contentious issues, providing member states with ample time to consider their stances and ultimately come to an understanding [11]. For example, despite significant political and security issues at that time of ASEAN's founding, focus was placed on areas more conducive to agreement, such as economic growth, social advancement, and cultural development. Political collaboration was formally acknowledged by ASEAN at the Bali Summit in 1976, following a reduction in tensions and an increased willingness to cooperate [12]. The "only realistic way for ASEAN to get to where it is now" has been described as the group's deliberative, gradual, and consensus-based strategy [13].

#### **SAARC**

After reviewing the South Asian region's geopolitical landscape, a significant disparity between India's size, population, economic and military potential, in comparison to that of the other member countries, becomes evident. India, with its vast resources and power potential, far outweighs the combined capabilities of the remaining South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) states. This has led to an asymmetrical power structure within the region, giving rise to concerns as compared to the smaller SAARC nations in terms of India's potential for dominance [14]. Such apprehension stems from the notion that India's preponderance may impede the equitable distribution of power and resources in South Asia.

The distinctive geographical feature of the South Asian region, except for the Maldives, all other states and India share borders, while the other states have no shared borders with each other, has led to an Indo-centric character in the region. Moreover, the majority of South Asia's ethnic and religious groups are situated in India, leading to concerns among smaller countries about the potential for cultural imperialism by India and the subsuming of their distinct identities within a larger Indian identity [15]. As a result, India finds itself in the unique position of being a consistent contributor to all regional crises yet its South Asian rivals have few disagreements with one another. Conflicts between India and its neighbours range from disagreements over the use of shared river flows and border concerns to the presence of undocumented immigrants, racial disparities, and trade and transit agreements with nations like China. The antagonism between India and Pakistan, precisely, delay collaboration in every sector and clouds the SAARC meetings.

Given the geopolitical circumstances in the area, where India is in charge of every aspect of bilateral negotiations, it wasn't ever intended for SAARC to serve as a formal mechanism for resolving disputes in South Asian Nations. South Asian Regional Partnership was initially put forward by Bangladesh, and was quickly adopted by the governments of Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The two leading countries in the region, Pakistan and India, were suspicious of the concept. While Pakistan was cautious of India controlling the situation due to its central location and influence in the area, some people in India believed that SAARC was an attempt by the smaller South Asian nations to gain sway in their issues with India. When SAARC was finally formed, it was agreed that all decisions would be decided by agreement and that bilateral controversial issues would not be discussed at SAARC meetings [16].

Since 1985, SAARC has made little progress, especially in terms of fostering regional harmony and cooperation. This analysis is still relevant despite a number of important actions the SAARC has previously done. Economic development has lagged even though the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement's (SAPTA) operationalization was a crucial step in involving vital economic sectors in the SAARC agenda. The general stall in efforts to foster more collaboration is a result of the slow growth of intra-regional commerce. Additionally, there are worries in the area that India, with its sizable economy and highly advanced industrial and technological development, could dominate other SAARC member states, damaging their economies.

The region's severe political and strategic discordance impedes SAARC's development. The successful operation of South Asian republics has been hampered by a lack of people-to-people interactions, especially between India and Pakistan. The timing of SAARC summits has also been impacted by this atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Contrarily, ASEAN has maintained to convene frequent regional consultations, demonstrating a consistent strategy, even as bilateral tensions have increased. In order to highlight areas where SAARC could benefit from resolving contentious issues that are now the incidents of ASEAN and SAARC are contrasted in the next section as the major barriers to regional peace and cooperation [17].

#### **SAARC and ASEAN: a comparison**

The prior examination indicated that there are still many regional conflicts and bilateral disagreements in South Asian region. The SAARC hasn't made much progress in creating the tools and plans needed to control and lessen these tensions. Southeast Asia, on the other hand, has been successful in creating an atmosphere of political and strategic alignment. ASEAN has handled bilateral and regional issues with comparatively more success. While there have been confrontations in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN approach to conflict management has successfully stopped hostilities from getting worse. SAARC has performed worse than ASEAN in this area. There are a number of things to take into account here.

#### **Geography of the region**

The disparity between India and Indonesia, the two regions' main powers, in terms of size, population, and power position, is a feature shared by SAARC and ASEAN. As was previously mentioned, with 72 percent of the area

covered by land (almost four times bigger than Pakistan, the second-biggest state), 77 percent of the population of the area (that's three times greater than the population of its neighbouring countries altogether), and 76 percent of all exports in the entire region, India maintains to be the biggest state in South Asia. Indonesia has authority over the rest of ASEAN, however not to the identical scale as India. With regard to the dimension, resources, and population, Indonesia is the most powerful country in Southeast Asia region, but as opposed to India, its influence is limited to the military and the economy. This difference widened as a result of the 1997 financial crisis, emissions from fires in the forests, the East Timor problem, and internal upheaval in the country<sup>[8]</sup>.

India is perceived as the dominant nation by the less developed South Asian countries, although ASEAN members commonly view India as a *primus inter pares* (first among equals), which is another distinction between the two regions. Many of the smaller SAARC nations view India as the main security danger and look to other powers to counteract its influence. For SAARC, this creates a dilemma because "India," a member of the group, is seen as the source of the threat. Contrast this with ASEAN, where the five founding members', strategic objectives united to confront the communist menace.

India's neighbours commonly charge that it is arrogant. For instance, when India chose to resume a Common Market and Transport agreement with Nepal in 1988 after Kathmandu was charged of violating the terms of the 1950 agreement by purchasing weapons from China, it was seen as a demonstration of regional dominance. It has also been claimed that India's participation in the Sri Lankan tension, IPKF activities, and tensions with Bangladesh over the division of the waters of the Ganges are proof of its control in the area. These disputes were eventually settled, but those involving India and Pakistan have been more challenging because neither party is ready to make concessions or compromise.

ASEAN has benefited more from the topography of its region than SAARC. In contrast to South Asia, where India is typically at the epicentre of hostilities, not one nation dominates ASEAN issues. Due to its shared boundaries, Malaysia has the most disagreements with the majority of founding ASEAN states, although it is not thought to be big or powerful enough to be a threat to the other nations<sup>[19]</sup>. In contrast, Indonesia has kept a low profile, which makes regional collaboration more feasible. Indonesia might have theoretically caused such concerns due to its strong position in the region. Furthermore, unlike in ASEAN, where more powerful nations like Thailand and Indonesia are divided by a buffer, India and Pakistan's close proximity exacerbates already high levels of animosity between the two nations, making it harder for the region to work together.

### **Economic rationale**

SAARC was created in 1985 with the express purpose of fostering regional economic advancement, social development, cultural growth, and shared self-sufficiency. The resolution of bilateral conflicts was not initially part of the organisation's mandate. However, a more complete review of SAARC reveals that cooperation in important economic and cultural fields where advancement was envisaged has been hindered by political fighting and disagreement in addition to poor economic development.

Despite the region's enormous commercial potential, just 3–4% of the entire trade between the region and the rest of the globe has come via SAARC. 1995 saw the approval of the South Asian Preferential Trading Agreement (SAPTA), and even though it was stated that by 2005 it will become a South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), the full potential benefits have not yet been realised. The number of commodities that qualify for preferential trade is small, and the concessions that are offered are also insufficient<sup>[20]</sup>.

Following the Bali Summit in 1975, ASEAN gave economic development top priority as a way to increase national resilience. A number of other economic initiatives, the ASEAN Complementation Scheme (AIC) in 1981, the ASEAN Industrial Joint Venture (AIJV) in 1983, and the ASEAN Industrial Project (AIP) in 1976, were also inked in 1977 after the establishment of economic committees. These efforts aided in accelerating progress<sup>[21]</sup>. Additionally, member states focused their attention and resources on economic development rather than political difficulties. This was accomplished not only through regional commerce, which has been constrained by the states' incompatibilities, but also through individual initiatives and expanding ties with other nations, such as the United States, Japan, and recently industrialised nations.

### **Mediation**

Another distinction between ASEAN and SAARC is that ASEAN countries have used third-party mediators to address issues that cannot be handled bilaterally. This tactic has worked well in circumstances like the Sabah dispute and Herzog scandal, both of which Indonesia mediated. In 1993, ASEAN also conducted workshops on the South China Sea conflict and conversations between the Philippine government and leaders of Muslim insurgents in an effort to deter military participation. The International Court of Justice is now hearing arguments on the Pedra Branca, Sipadan, and Ligitan islands, and any decisions it renders will be legally enforceable. In an alternative scenario, the *Flor Contemplacion* case was sent by the Philippines and Singapore to a team of three US forensic experts for a third-party investigation to obtain information on the murder victim<sup>[22]</sup>.

Due to a climate of distrust and mutual animosity, the South Asian region inhibits the use of such a strategy. In order to settle issues with its neighbours, India continues to be leery of using international arbitration and prefers a bilateral strategy. Conversely, Pakistan wants issues to be systematically globalised, particularly concerning Kashmir. Both parties are unwilling to acknowledge the other's perspective, resulting in an unresolved stalemate.

### **Conflict management strategy for SAARC**

With new global economic and political developments, the topic of whether ASEAN's approach to conflict resolution may serve as an example to other territories, particularly South Asian Region, has received more attention. Given the imperative for regional cooperation in South Asia for promoting peace and security, it is critical to develop credible mechanisms to foster trust between states, notably India and Pakistan. The failure to do so could lead to long-term counterproductivity. As noted earlier, the ASEAN method of resolving conflicts entails member state engagement through dialogue and consultation, with a focus on addressing issues that are amenable to resolution.

It is evident that India and Pakistan must engage in ongoing dialogue and consultations to address conflicts in South Asia. Following the nuclear tests in May 1998 and the subsequent developments in Afghanistan following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American soil, the necessity for India and Pakistan to take swift action to manage and resolve problems has substantially intensified. This process must continue and expand on the current Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) that the two countries have established in order to lower tensions in the area. The establishment of an immediate channel of dialogue across the two heads of state, the 1991 adoption of a Joint Statement on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the 1992 adoption of a Joint Statement on the Non-Attack of Each Other's Nuclear Resources, and the advance notification of military drills, manoeuvres, and troop movements are a few examples <sup>[23]</sup>.

In order to put a halt to conflicts like the Kashmir conflict and instead concentrate on investigating economic growth and free trade, India and Pakistan can use ASEAN's method for deferring resolution of difficult problems. These efforts not only promote development in socio-economic sectors but also facilitate regional cooperation in South Asia. Additionally, enhancing cultural ties and promoting human-to-human interaction and visa and travel restrictions being relaxed can contribute to building trust and fostering friendship between the two nations, thereby paving the way for resolving more complex political issues.

Beyond the Indo-Pak conflict, South Asia's intra-regional cooperation is greatly influenced by India's relationships with other South Asian states. Indonesia's position in ASEAN differs from Indian role in the region, as there is no consensus on accepting India's predominance, limiting its power, or India's voluntary decision to maintain a low profile <sup>[24]</sup>. Being the greatest power in the area and the only one sharing borders with all of the South Asian republics, India is crucial in establishing the tone for bilateral relations and creating an amicable framework for cooperative cooperation.

In this context, Indonesia's approach of positive interaction with ASEAN region can offer valuable insights for India in fostering a relaxed atmosphere and promoting cooperation within the region.

South Asia may learn a lot from ASEAN nations about how to avoid supporting insurgency activities and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other members of the organisation. In order to address cross-border insurgencies, formal and informal extradition, and other challenges in the region, several multilateral border safety protocols have been developed by ASEAN's participating nations. Similar to this, SAARC member nations need to exercise more discretion while openly or surreptitiously meddling in the domestic affairs of their neighbours.

Lastly, expediting economic cooperation would be advantageous for SAARC. ASEAN has demonstrated success in establishing mutually beneficial economic ties, both within and without the region. The ASEAN system of economics provides SAARC with a number of helpful strategies that it can use, including campaigns for alleviating poverty by means of elementary and secondary schooling, developing skills, agricultural reform for shared development, health services, and enhanced availability of job opportunities, as well as private sector interaction among member countries, the establishment of a Regional Transit Network system designed to encourage interconnection-regional trade development, increased foreign investment, and these initiatives <sup>[25]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The debate above demonstrates how SAARC may learn important lessons about how to improve confidence and collaboration in South Asia region from ASEAN's dispute resolution tactics and processes. The countries of South Asia are making efforts to create and maintain trust-building options may benefit greatly from the consultative and consensus-building methods used by ASEAN to manage persistent disputes without interfering with local dynamics of stability, growth, and peace. However, it is crucial to understand that because every region has its own political, economic, and cultural circumstances, another region cannot fully reproduce the distinctive experience one region has had in dealing with its challenges. This highlights the need of acknowledging each region's geopolitical realities and economic needs rather than undermining the value of learning relevant lessons from other locations. Each region ultimately needs to develop a conflict management and resolution strategy that fits with its unique geopolitical dynamics and economic needs.

South Asia must demonstrate the necessary political tenacity and audacity to make the necessary investments in a better future for itself in light of the rapidly changing regional circumstances. The combination of diverse state political objectives, intergovernmental conflict resolution initiatives, and regional concord will ultimately determine how SAARC develops. SAARC could gain a great deal from ASEAN's model in this regard

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