

Rethinking Regionalism in a Polarized World

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the evolving dynamics of regionalism within an increasingly polarized global landscape, focusing on a comparative analysis of the European Union (EU) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). By examining their political, economic, and institutional frameworks, this study explores how regional cooperation promotes peace, fosters economic development, and strengthens collective security. Additionally, it delves into the roles of interregionalism, transregionalism, and globalization in shaping regional alliances.

Keywords: Regionalism, Interregionalism, EU, SAARC, Globalization, Collective Security, Economic Integration

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has become a cornerstone in the architecture of global governance, fostering economic partnerships, political alliances, and cultural exchanges among neighboring nations (Keohane 112). This study contextualizes regionalism within the framework of a fragmented world, highlighting the value of comparative analysis between the EU and SAARC. Employing qualitative analysis and case study methodologies, the research evaluates how regional cooperation mitigates global polarization, enhances stability, and drives economic growth (Mitrany 85).

Regionalism Perspectives

Regionalism can be studied from any of the following perspectives;

Functional region-an area tied together by nature of its economic and trade relations, agricultural production, geographic characteristics, or other functional aspects. Functional regionalism includes the rise of regional trade organizations like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Area), or the EU. Another example of a functional region might be an agricultural zone, as in the U.S. Midwest. In a discussion of commerce, trade, and economic development in different parts of the world, one finds much discussion on functional regionalism.

Vernacular region-. Vernacular refers to a language that is native to a country or a region. A vernacular region describes an area where people live and closely identify with their culture, language and history. People who live in such regions see their part of earth as uniquely distinct from that of others. This type of regionalism highlights self-identity and territory. At least two types of vernacular regionalism can be identified. One type is the ethnic national territorial region, which stems from ethnic national identity. A second is the perceptual region, which people identify owing to its environmental, economic, and cultural features.

Ethnic regions- Cases in point are America's South and Southwest Sunbelt, Russia's Siberia, or China's thriving coastal area. Where ethnic nationalism is strong, it creates powerful regional territorial identities within and across state boundaries that result in political consequences. This type of regionalism, for example is evident in the national identity and nationalism of the Kurdish people in the Middle East, the historic nationalities of-Catalan, Basque, and Galician in Spain etc.

Perceptual regions-Perceptual regions are fascinating because they are capable of exerting strong political forces but tend to receive less attention than they deserve in the study of international relations. Most states around the world have perceptual regions within their territories and in some places the perceptual region of one state crosses over into another. To quote a few they are: Italy's northern league, Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka etc.

Formal regions-which refers essentially to a local government, but often includes an area of shared characteristics, such as common language, economic productivity, or an environmental property like climate. Examples of formal regions are autonomous communities, such those in Spain, as in India (Ladakh Autonomous Council) etc.

Federalism: Community Integration

When studying the theoretical approaches on Regional Integration, the concept of federalism is the most primary one. It has been frequently applied to a limited geographical area. Advocates of international federation failed to deal with a number of its implications and with the possibilities of bringing it into effect, while regional federation proponents (European) went beyond it. The demand for world federation was strong during and soon after Second World War. The post war European federalist thought developed out of the growing pessimism generated by the two world wars, questioning the capability of the nation-state system to preserve peace within Europe.

One of the basic principles of federalism is the creation of supranational institutions as the best method for uniting people sharing common features such as language or culture or geographic proximity. By implication, federalism seeks to adapt institutions that operate at a national level for use on a regional basis. Despite the different times at which it was conceived and written about, there is continuity in the federalist thought.

As Michael O'Neill says that:

"Mainly it is method of obtaining political union among separate states. It believed that the nation state was obsolescent and must be transcended, although they disagreed about the arrangement for replacing it".¹

Federalism requires political authority and power to be shared between the central and regional authorities which should remain independent of each other, but act in a coordinated fashion. These days mainly the focus is on Regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and economic integration. The Theory that is adopted;

Alliance Cooperation

The focus of international-relation theory has always been the study of the causes of conflict and the conditions for cooperation. As. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff says that:"the study of political relationships, within or among states, encompasses conflict and cooperation"².

While Joseph Grieco says that:

"Cooperation may occur as a result of adjustments in behaviour by actors in response to, or in anticipation of, the preferences of other actors. Cooperation can be negotiated in a bargaining process that is explicit or tacit. Cooperation may be the result of a relationship between a strong actor and a weaker party"³.

Hegemonic powers may provide stability that enhances the security and economic well-being of lesser states in the form of Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century or the more recent Pax American. Helen Milner quite aptly opines that:

"The hegemonic power provides a basis for mutual gains in the form of expanding markets of military protection."⁴

Cooperation has been defined by Groom and Taylor as:

"a set of relationship that is not based on coercion or compliance and that are legitimized, as in an international organization such as the United Nations or the European Union"⁵.

Cooperation may arise either from a commitment on the part of the individual to the welfare of the collectivity or as a result of perceived self-interest.

Of central importance for Theory of Cooperation is the extent to which the incentives for, or benefits from, cooperation can be run to outweigh the incentives to act unilaterally. While Geoffrey Garnett says that:

"the frequent repetition of interactions, the development of greater communication and transparency between states in the form of exchange of information about the objects of cooperation, and development of every

¹ Michael O'Neill, "The Politics of European Integration", Routledge, London, 1996, p.21.

² James. E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr.(eds.), "Contending Theories of International Relations", Addison Wesley Publications, New York, 1997, p.418.

³ Joseph Grieco, "Cooperation Among Nations", Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1990, p.48.

⁴ Helen Milner, "International Theories of Cooperation among Nations", World Politics, 44 April, 1992, pp. 467-470.

⁵ A.J.R. Groom and P. Taylor (eds.), "Framework for International Cooperation", Pinter Publishers, London, 1990, p.3.

rudimentary institutions in which such cooperative patterns can be realized represent ingredients in a theory of cooperation based on self-interest in an archaic international system"⁶.

Multilateralism

In any theoretical discussing of international cooperation encompasses relationships between two states or relationships among larger numbers of units, known as Multilateralism. Generally cooperative arrangements emerge frequently between two states; a major focus of international cooperation has been multilateral. According to John Gerard Ruggie, Multilateralism is defined as an

"institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct"⁷.

Thus the term multilateral so defined refers to generalized principles of conduct that may be expressed in a variety of institutional settings across a spectrum that includes international organizations, international regimes, and less concrete phenomena termed international orders, such as the open trading order of the late nineteenth century or in the era of the global economy of the late twentieth century.

Integration

Integration is defined as a process leading to a condition called "Political Community". Integration theorists have emphasized the integrative process at the International level as primarily consensual or based principally on the development of shared norms, values, interests or goals. The evolution of integration beyond the nation-state is said to depend on perceived shared needs. ERNEST HASS defines integration as:

"a process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the preexisting national states"⁸.

Another integration theorist Karl W. Deutsch referred to political integration as:

"a process that may lead to a condition in which a group of people has attained within a territory a sense of community and of institution and practices strong enough to assure, for a long time, dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population"⁹. Deutsche even suggested that "integration is a matter of fact, not of time"¹⁰.

James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff Jr. whose seminal work- "contending Theories of International relations",¹¹ had opined that:

"writers on integration have several features in common. All are concerned with the process by which loyalty or attention is shifted from one point of focus to another. They share an interest in patterns of communications and transactions within units to be integrated"¹².

Finally, it is broadly assumed by James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff that: "integration is a multidimensional phenomenon which encompasses the political, societal, cultural and economic dimensions, leading to a sense of common identity and integrated community"¹³.

ALLIANCE: COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Cooperative relationships extend to other levels of analysis. At both the international and the domestic levels, groups are formed to enable their members to achieve a shared objective. Alliances are designed to facilitate the attainment of goals by as Robert L. Rothstein suggests that:

"introducing into the situation a specific commitment to pursue them; to a certain extent, it legitimizes that pursuit by inscribing it in a treaty, and it increases the probability that the goals will be pursued because the alliance creates a new status which makes it more difficult for the parties to renege on each other"¹⁴.

Among the theorists of alliance behaviour, in the forefront are George Liska and William Rikes. In their theoretical frameworks, Liska and Rikes are similar in several respects. First, they agree that:

"alliances or coalitions, disband once they have achieved their objective, because they are formed essentially against, and only derivatively for, someone or something"¹⁵.

⁶ Geoffrey Garnett, "International Cooperation and Institutional Choice", Spring 1992), pp.533-557.

⁷ John Gerard Ruggie (ed.), "Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form", CUP Publications, New York, 1993, p.11.

⁸ Ernst B. Hass, "The Uniting of Europe", SUP Publications, Stanford, 1958, p.16.

⁹ Karl W. Deutsch et al., "Political Community And The North Atlantic Area", Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p.5.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.6.

¹¹ James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff Jr. (eds.), "Contending Theories of International Relations", Wesley Longman Publications, New York, 1997, p.421.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 422.

¹⁴ Robert L. Rothstein, "Alliances and Small Powers", Colombia University Press, New York, 1968, p.55.

¹⁵ George P. Liska, "Nation in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence", John Hop Kim Press, Baltimore, 1962, p.12.

Ultimately, the cohesiveness of an alliance as Liska opines that:

“rests on the relationship between internal and external pressures, bearing on the ratio of gains to liabilities for individual allies.¹⁶

According to Liska, nations join alliances for security, stability and status. In Liska's theory, a primary prerequisite for alliance cohesion is the development of an alliance ideology. He says that:

“The function of alliance ideology is to provide a rationalization for alliance. In performing this function, ideology “feeds on reflective memory of the past and outlines a program for the future.”¹⁷

Balance of Power

What matters most to alliance formation is the idea of maintaining the critical balance of power in international relations. The formation of one coalition contributes to the formation of an opposing coalition. When one coalition is on the verge of victory, neutral actors often join the weaker of the coalitions to prevent the stronger from attaining hegemony. If neutral members do not align themselves with the weaker side, some members of the leading coalition must shift to the weaker of the two coalitions if the system is to regain equilibrium. As Zinnes says that:

“Equilibrium is the likely result of the existence of two quasi permanent blocking coalitions. Or the presence of such coalition that play the role of balances if a temporary wining coalition sets the stakes too high”¹⁸.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discourse on regionalism is anchored in foundational theories such as Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, and the Spillover Effect (Schmitter 161). Functionalism posits that technical and economic cooperation can lay the groundwork for political integration, while Neofunctionalism underscores the role of supranational institutions in advancing regional unity. The Spillover Effect suggests that progress in one sector can catalyze integration across other areas. The study also examines interregionalism and transregionalism as models for fostering cross-border cooperation, particularly under the influence of globalization (Bhagwati and Panagariya 45).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Functionalism: Regional Integration brings mutual benefits for all participating nations by fostering technical institutions. *Haas (1958) and Mitrany (1975)*

Neofunctionalism: Integration through economic and political linkages. *Jeffrey C. Alexander, Paul Colomy and Joseph Nye (1971)*

Multilateralism: Coordination among multiple states. *Ruggie (1993)*

Integration Theorists: Regional Integration Factors that contribute to successful cooperation. *Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1990)*

NEED FOR THE STUDY

To understand

- 1) Why EU succeeded in deeper integration
- 2) Challenges hindering SAARC's cooperation
- 3) Lessons SAARC can learn from EU's institutional framework

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

- 1) Comparative analysis of SAARC and EU
- 2) Recommendations for strengthening SAARC
- 3) Evaluation of political, economic, and social integration

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To study the factors influencing cooperative federalism.
- 2) To examine the practises prevalent in Regional cooperation at SAARC.
- 3) To find out the model of regional integration being adopted by EU.
- 4) To examine comparatively models of regional cooperation approached by SAARC & EU.
- 5) To suggest mechanisms to improve regional cooperation after duly studying SAARC & EU.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- 1) Structural differences between SAARC & EU
- 2) Inconsistent data availability for SAARC countries

¹⁶Ibid ., p.175.

¹⁷Ibid., p.61.

¹⁸ Dina A. Zinnes, "Coalition Theories and the Balance of Power", pp.351-368.

- 3) Focus on macroeconomic factors
- 4) Macro-level study; limited micro-level country-specific insights

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: EU VS. SAARC

EU represents a successful model of supranational integration, characterized by cohesive policymaking and effective conflict resolution mechanisms, which have bolstered intra-regional trade and political stability (Nye 73). The Maastricht Treaty, the Schengen Agreement, and the introduction of the euro exemplify its phased approach to integration. In contrast, SAARC struggles with limited institutional capacity and persistent geopolitical tensions, notably between India and Pakistan, which have stymied deeper cooperation. While the EU thrives on a shared vision and collective policymaking, SAARC remains hampered by political discord and minimal intra-regional trade (Bhagwati and Panagariya 90).

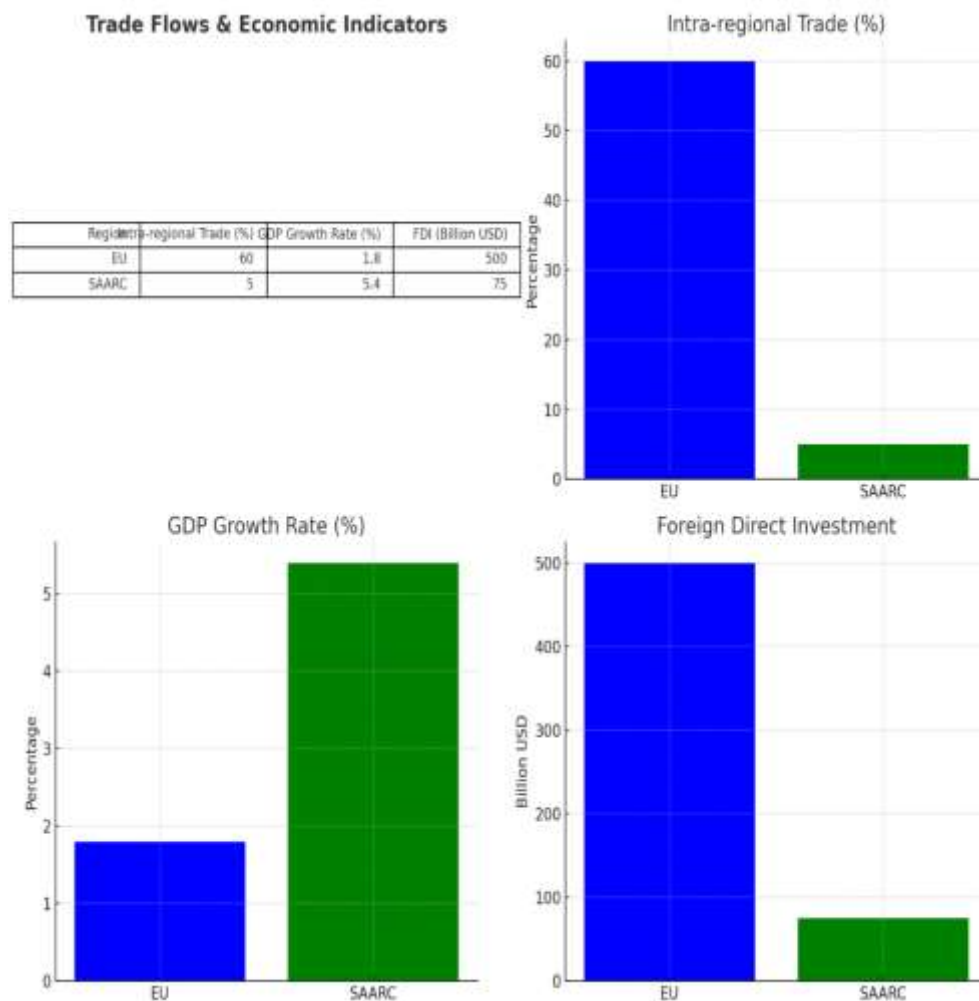


Figure 1: Comparative Trade, GDP Growth, and FDI between EU and SAARC

Global Governance Implications

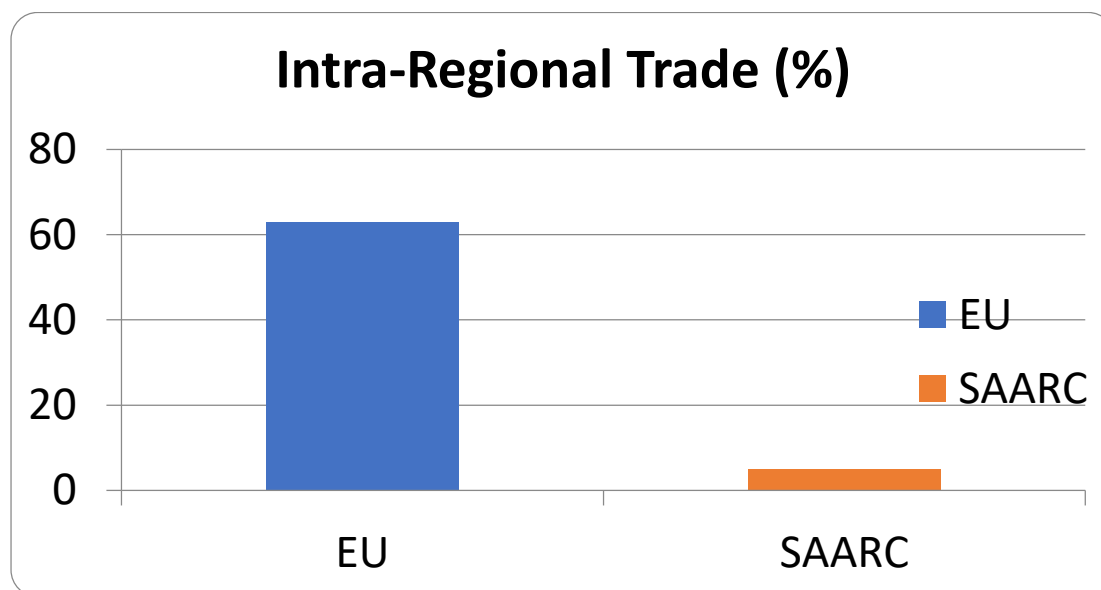
Shifts in Global Power Dynamics: In the Global era has reshaped global power dynamics, emphasizing multipolarity and the recalibration of international alliances (Keohane 150). The retreat from unilateralism has reinvigorated multilateral diplomacy, empowering emerging economies and reshaping global governance frameworks. The growing influence of China, alongside a more assertive EU, has created new centers of power, gradually challenging the traditional dominance of the United States.

Impact on Regional Cooperation (SAARC & EU): As per the changing geopolitical climate had varied effects on regional cooperation structures. The EU has leveraged the renewed emphasis on multilateralism to fortify its global standing, driven by initiatives like the European Green Deal and cohesive foreign policies (Mitrany 102). Conversely, SAARC remains hindered by deep-seated political conflicts, with India-Pakistan tensions continuing to obstruct meaningful progress toward regional integration.

Economic Integration & Trade: EU vs SAARC

EU's Intra-regional trade accounts for ~63% of total trade while that of SAARC: Intra-regional trade is only ~5%. The reasons that can be attributed for such disparity is: trade barriers, weak implementation of

agreements. Main reason could be lack of political will as well from the SAARC member states as a driving force for economic integration.



US Foreign Policy Changes and Their Global Ripple Effects: The shift in US foreign policy —marked by re-engagement with multilateral agreements such as the Paris Accord—has revitalized transatlantic ties and reshaped global diplomatic strategies (Nye 89). However, the persistent strategic rivalry between the US and China continues to influence global trade patterns, security alliances, and regional stability, particularly within the Indo-Pacific.

Policy Implications: Recommendations to strengthen SAARC, comprehensive institutional reforms are essential, prioritizing transparency, efficient conflict resolution, and deeper economic integration (Bhagwati and Panagariya 123). Policy recommendations include the reduction of trade barriers, investment in regional infrastructure, and the promotion of digital economies. SAARC should also enhance interregional partnerships with bodies like ASEAN and the EU to foster greater cooperation. Inclusive policies focusing on poverty reduction, gender equity, and environmental sustainability are vital for achieving long-term stability.

CRITICAL FINDINGS

The Study comes out with the following critical findings i.e.,

- EU's integration success due to strong institutions
- SAARC's progress limited by political tensions and weak frameworks
- Economic disparities hinder SAARC

Regional Cooperation: As tool for Conflict Prevention

Historically Regional Cooperation has been an effective tool for conflict resolution. While EU had adopted effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Post-WWII reconciliation efforts, economic cooperation leading to peace. SAARC is hindered by bilateral conflicts; Bilateral tensions (India-Pakistan) limiting cooperation. The lack of dispute resolution mechanisms in SAARC is the main problem for development of SAARC and the rule of Unanimity. For any regional cooperation to be successful a special focus should be kept on Peacebuilding, economic interdependence, and social integration.

Conflict Case Studies: Indo-Pak Rivalry and Brexit

Indo-Pak Rivalry

The protracted conflict between India and Pakistan, originating from the 1947 partition of British India, has been marked by multiple wars and persistent military tensions, primarily over the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. This enduring rivalry is fueled by deep-seated political, territorial, and ideological differences, compounded by issues of national identity and minimal economic interdependence. These complexities have rendered the conflict resistant to numerous diplomatic efforts and peace initiatives.

Brexit



Brexit refers to the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union, a move that has significantly altered Europe's political and economic landscape. The 2016 referendum, in which 52% voted in favor of leaving, initiated extensive negotiations concerning the terms of departure. Key issues included trade agreements, border controls, and citizens' rights. The process exposed deep divisions within the UK and posed challenges to the EU's unity. Brexit has sparked discussions on national sovereignty, economic independence, and the future of regional integration, serving as a critical case study in understanding the complexities of supranational unions and the factors that can lead to their dissolution.

Comparative Analysis

While the Indo-Pak rivalry and Brexit differ in their origins and manifestations, both highlight the profound impact of political and territorial disputes on regional stability. The Indo-Pak conflict demonstrates how unresolved historical grievances and identity politics can perpetuate cycles of hostility, hindering regional cooperation and development. In contrast, Brexit illustrates the challenges inherent in maintaining supranational entities, especially when national interests and perceptions of sovereignty conflict with collective goals. Both cases underscore the necessity for robust conflict resolution mechanisms and the importance of addressing underlying issues to foster lasting peace and cooperation.

SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

After doing the following study of various factors affecting the regional cooperation in the Polarized world and the new World order being shaping, the following suggestions and recommendations are being made i.e.,

- Strengthen SAARC's institutional framework
- Promote economic interdependence ; Economic disparities hinder SAARC's success
- Develop conflict resolution mechanisms will reduce Political instability and mistrust slow regional integration
- Learn from EU's best practices; EU's strong institutions ensure policy implementation

CONCLUSION

Regionalism continues to be a driving force in shaping global politics and economic landscapes (Keohane 172). The EU's experience underscores the benefits of deep integration and shared governance, while SAARC's ongoing challenges highlight the complexities of fostering regional unity amid geopolitical tensions. By prioritizing institutional strengthening, conflict resolution, and inclusive economic policies, SAARC can chart a path toward more effective regional cooperation. Encourage people-to-people connectivity through cultural & educational programs. In the present day world, there is an absolute need for institutional reforms and trust-building measures in all the regional bodies.

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