

## Afghanistan's Re-integration in SAARC

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*Flags of the SAARC Member states*

Afghanistan had shown an ardent interest in joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since its inception in 1985, but the civil war and political instability proved as obstacles in its path to become a part of the regional group. It was only after 23 years since SAARC's inception that Afghanistan became one of its members, during the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit in Dhaka in 2007.

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*14<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit in New Delhi, 2007, Source: Hindustan Times*

After the fall of the Taliban regime and formation of the government, strengthening regional cooperation by maintaining cordial relations with neighbouring South Asian countries has become an important approach of Afghanistan's foreign policy. Having genial relations with SAARC member states is of paramount importance for the country, as it will help to bring about peace and stability through improved trade and regional connectivity. All the SAARC member states, especially India and Pakistan have been welcoming towards Afghanistan because its strategic location is pivotal for their economic development. Afghanistan acts as a gateway to West Asia and Central Asia for South Asian countries and this is as a significant factor for the SAARC agenda on economic cooperation and energy security. According to a *New York Times* report published in 2010, Afghanistan has 150 billion cubic metres of

unexplored natural gas reserves and is home to \$1 trillion (US) worth minerals. It also has an unexplored base of resources such as iron, nickel, chrome, copper, silver, gold, sulphur, magnesium, mica, mercury, bauxite, lithium and ruby. Therefore, energy deficient economies are eagerly awaiting the stabilization of the country in order to possibly access these resources. Indian and Chinese companies have already become huge players in the Afghan resource markets, especially the oil sector.

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Apart from economic and trade cooperation, Afghanistan faces security issues which are similar to those of its neighbours and other SAARC nations. Terrorism, poverty and illiteracy are prominent in all the SAARC nations. While terrorism is at an all-time high, illiteracy and poverty has reduced but not eradicated. These issues can be solved better when worked on, together. Afghanistan has acted as a breeding ground for terrorism and this has not only impacted the nation and its neighbours, but also hampered peace and security within the international community. Hence, to find plausible solutions for the eradication of terrorism, cooperation via SAARC is extremely necessary for the region as well Afghanistan.

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Almost all member states of SAARC are developing nations, with each trying to increase its sphere of influence. But in the last decade or so, the countries have come to an understanding that working together can facilitate their rise as an important regional bloc; asserting their influence in the international arena. The Cooperation since its establishment has hosted nineteen summits with none being held by Afghanistan due financial and security issues. However, despite the challenges, Afghanistan has participated fully according within its capacity. It has organised some important meetings such as the SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) in October 2015, and has contributed to building the South Asian University along with other South Asian countries. Welfare and development projects like maternal and child healthcare have benefitted the country, following its investment in the SAARC fund.



*PM Modi and President Ghani at India-Afghanistan towards strong Economic Ties Meet*

Another aspect of SAARC membership is the enhancement of bilateral relations with the member states. Relations with India post 2001 have improved as India has taken an active role in rebuilding Afghanistan. India is one of the top three international aid donors to Afghanistan and has invested \$2 billion (US) as of now. The aid has been channelled into capacity and institution building, in critical sectors like politics, economy and security with the objective of achieving human and capital formation. With the purpose of attaining its goal of re-integrating Afghanistan into SAARC and helping its rebuilding, India has adopted a soft power approach. It has invested heavily in infrastructural projects like the Salma Dam, and political and administrative capacity building like assistance in building the Afghanistan parliament. India's interest in Afghanistan is mainly based on three aspects: terrorism, economic cooperation and regional aspiration. The volatile border between Afghanistan-Pakistan has been a source of terrorism which is entering India. A strong and stable Afghanistan can help reduce the perils of terrorism and extremist violence which has been destabilising the region. Moreover, Afghanistan can link the South Asian Countries to Central Asia, paving the way for economic prosperity. Countering terrorism and promoting trade, transit, investment and economic development of Afghanistan to achieve its national interest is only possible by re-integrating and incorporating it into SAARC.

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The situation in Afghanistan is constantly changing and the war-torn country's future appears to be uncertain, especially if the troops retreat and a Taliban friendly government is established. Irrespective of the support from international donors, there might be a decrease in the funds or aid appropriated for Afghanistan's development. Kabul will have to tap into other sources of income in order to stabilize its crumbling economy, its deteriorating security and its collapsing society. In this scenario, its immediate neighbours and SAARC can help provide support because their stability and peace are affected by the changing dynamics as well.

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