

## **India-SAARC brief**

1. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional organization comprising eight Member States of South Asia - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It was established on 8 December 1985 through the adoption of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka, Bangladesh. SAARC is established with the objective of promoting the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and accelerating economic growth, social progress and cultural development through collective self-reliance and mutual cooperation. The organization seeks to strengthen regional cooperation in economic, social, scientific, technical and cultural fields while promoting mutual trust and understanding among member states. SAARC region is home to nearly 1.9 billion people, representing approximately 24% of the world's population, with a combined GDP of around US\$ 5 trillion. The SAARC Secretariat is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The current Secretary-General of SAARC is Mr. Md. Golam Sarwar from Bangladesh.

2. SAARC conducts inter-governmental interactions through Summits, Council of Ministers Meetings, Standing Committee Meetings, Programming Committee Meetings and meetings of Sectoral Technical Committees. Eighteen SAARC Summits have been held so far since the first in 1985 in Dhaka. The last SAARC Summit (18th Summit) was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 26–27 November 2014 under the theme “Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity”. The 19th SAARC Summit, scheduled to be hosted by Pakistan in 2016, has not taken place and Summit-level engagement within SAARC has remained stalled due to the prevailing lack of consensus among member states and concerns relating to cross-border terrorism. Consequently, SAARC activities are presently limited to technical, expert-level and official-level meetings.

3. The last formal meeting of the Council of Ministers (Foreign Ministers) was held in Pokhara, Nepal, in March 2016. Subsequently, SAARC Foreign Ministers also engaged through informal meetings on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. The last such meeting was held in September 2020 virtually. The last meeting of the SAARC Standing Committee (Foreign Secretaries) was held in March 2016 in Pokhara, Nepal. Meetings of the SAARC Programming Committee and Governing Boards of SAARC Regional Centres and Specialized Bodies continue to be held. The latest Programming Committee Meeting was held on 11–12 February 2026 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Senior Officials from sectoral Ministries have maintained periodic consultations to sustain regional dialogue and cooperation.

4. SAARC cooperation spans multiple sectors including Trade and Economic Cooperation, Agriculture and Food Security, Education, Health, Environment and Climate Change, Science and Technology, Energy, Culture and Tourism, Poverty Alleviation and Disaster Management. There are several Agreements, Conventions and MoUs under the SAARC framework including the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and the SAARC

Visa Exemption Scheme. SAARC's economic cooperation framework is supported by the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS). These agreements promote preferential and free trade in goods, facilitate trade in services, and strengthen economic integration among Member States, thereby contributing to increased intra-regional trade and regional prosperity in South Asia. However, due to implementation issues of the framework the intra-regional trade remains less than mere 6%.

5. SAARC has established a number of Regional Centers and Specialized Bodies to promote cooperation across priority sectors. The principal institutions currently functioning under the SAARC framework are:

Regional Centers:

- (i) SAARC Agriculture Center, Dhaka
- (ii) SAARC Culture Center, Colombo
- (iii) SAARC Energy Center, Islamabad
- (iv) SAARC TB & AIDS Center, Kathmandu

Specialized Bodies:

- (i) South Asian University (SAU), New Delhi
- (ii) SAARC Development Fund (SDF), Thimphu
- (iii) SAARC Arbitration Council (SAARCO), Islamabad
- (iv) South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO), Dhaka

6. South Asian University (SAU), New Delhi, was established through an Inter-Governmental Agreement adopted at the 14th SAARC Summit in 2007 in New Delhi. The University commenced academic activities in 2010 and offers graduate, postgraduate and doctoral programmes in diverse disciplines. India provides full capital cost and contributes 59% of the University's operational budget and hosts students and facilities from all SAARC Member States.

7. India has consistently supported regional cooperation under the SAARC framework through initiatives in education, disaster management, public health, digital connectivity, financial cooperation and capacity building. India continues to support people-centric regional cooperation while advocating an environment free from terrorism for meaningful regional integration. Despite challenges affecting Summit-level engagement, SAARC remains an important regional framework for dialogue and cooperation in South Asia and continues to provide institutional mechanisms for collaboration among its member states.

As on June, 2026