

SADF Podcast S4E2 Edited Transcript

SADF Podcast

The SAARC Saga at 40: Can South Asia Rediscover Regional Cooperation?

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance, arguments and character of the original conversation. Views expressed by the speakers are their own.

Natasha Fernando

Hello everyone, and welcome to the South Asia Democratic Forum Podcast.

Today, we are marking the **40th anniversary of SAARC**, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Our guest is **Professor Imtiaz Ahmed**, a well-known scholar of international relations at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh. He holds a PhD from Carleton University in Ottawa and is currently Executive Director of the Centre for Alternatives, an independent non-governmental think tank in Bangladesh. He also previously served as Executive Director of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

We invited Professor Ahmed to reflect on the 40th anniversary of the SAARC Charter.

On 8 December 2025, SAARC marked four decades since its establishment in 1985. Its early objectives focused on regional cooperation in areas such as agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, health and population.

Today, however, SAARC faces enormous political obstacles.

Recent tensions in the region, including the Pahalgam terrorist attack and the subsequent deterioration in India-Pakistan relations, have once again raised questions about the future of regional cooperation.

So, Professor Ahmed, let me begin with the obvious question:

What role is there for SAARC in South Asia today?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Thank you, Natasha.

At this stage, unfortunately, not very much.

SAARC has effectively been stalled since 2014.

For it to regain momentum, there would have to be some change in the relationship between India and Pakistan, because that remains the central political obstacle.

Some activities have continued.

The **South Asian University** is probably the most significant institutional initiative to emerge from SAARC, although even that has operated on a more limited scale than originally envisaged.

The idea was not simply to have one university located in Delhi. It was to have a regional university with campuses across South Asia.

That never materialised.

There have also been technical meetings from time to time on issues such as drugs and agriculture.

But the SAARC Summit itself has not been held since 2014.

A lot of people have therefore lost hope in SAARC.

Unless something changes, particularly in the India-Pakistan relationship, I do not see the Summit restarting easily.

At the same time, we should remember that the geopolitical context of South Asia today is very different from what it was 40 years ago.

The region itself has changed dramatically.

So I would not completely give up.

SAARC may eventually return in some form, although perhaps not exactly in the form we originally knew.

Natasha Fernando

That is a very useful starting point.

Let me ask you about South Asia itself as a region.

The seven founding members of SAARC were Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with Afghanistan joining in 2007.

But today, depending on the organisation or policy context, South Asia is sometimes conceptualised differently.

At times Afghanistan is treated separately; at other times Bhutan or Maldives receive less attention; and different regional groupings draw the boundaries in different ways.

How do you think about South Asia as a regional space?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

When we are discussing SAARC, I do not think we can simply remove any of the eight existing members.

But yes, the meaning of “South Asia” has shifted over time.

One major factor is **China**.

If you look at development and economic relations today, China has had an enormous impact on South Asian countries.

China is now the largest trading partner of virtually all South Asian countries, including India.

This year, India's trade with China is larger than its trade with the United States.

So in terms of trade, China remains extremely important.

And when we look at development financing, the picture is similar.

With the exception of India and perhaps Bhutan, China has become one of the largest development partners of countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

I argued in a paper years ago that, economically speaking, **China has effectively become a South Asian country**.

The geopolitical and economic reality has moved in that direction.

So, in future, the concept of South Asia may continue to expand.

Afghanistan certainly remains part of it, and I would not rule out Myanmar becoming more closely associated with it either.

We should also remember that SAARC already has observer states, including China.

I have argued for many years that SAARC could consider something similar to **ASEAN Plus Three**.

Perhaps SAARC should think about a "plus three" framework involving China, Japan and potentially the United States, if those countries wished to participate.

That could give the organisation new relevance.

But again, everything becomes difficult when India-Pakistan relations remain blocked.

Natasha Fernando

That brings us to the rise of other regional organisations.

How do you see SAARC in relation to **BIMSTEC** and the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation**?

Several South Asian countries participate in these other organisations, and India has often been more active in them.

After the Pahalgam attacks, for example, the Tianjin Declaration issued through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation became part of the diplomatic conversation around India and Pakistan.

So we now have the strange situation in which India and Pakistan can sit together in the SCO, but SAARC remains paralysed.

How do you interpret that?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

It is indeed ironic.

India and Pakistan cannot sit together effectively within SAARC, yet they participate together in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

I have raised this point many times.

If you can work together in the SCO, why can you not work together in SAARC?

It does not make much logical sense.

One explanation is domestic politics.

Anti-Pakistan sentiment is extremely strong in India, just as anti-India sentiment is extremely strong in Pakistan.

Political leaders in both countries can use these antagonisms domestically.

Negative politics can be electorally useful.

Anti-Pakistan rhetoric works in India, and anti-India rhetoric works in Pakistan.

Perhaps the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is treated differently because it belongs to another geopolitical framework.

But the contradiction remains.

There are also oddities elsewhere.

Bangladesh, for example, is not a member of the SCO.

I have asked Bangladeshi policymakers why the country never seriously pursued membership.

One former foreign secretary told me quite openly that Bangladesh simply never took it seriously.

I found that surprising.

Sometimes policymakers have their own priorities, and those may not align with broader regional interests.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

This brings me to what I consider one of SAARC's biggest weaknesses:

the regional mindset was never properly developed.

Too much emphasis was placed on economics too early, particularly trade.

That was a mistake.

Intra-regional trade in South Asia has remained extremely low—around 5 or 6 per cent.

Our economies often produce similar goods, and much of our export profit comes from selling to developed markets outside the region.

So trade was never going to be an easy starting point.

I believe much greater attention should have been given to **education and mindset formation**.

That is why I became involved very early in thinking about a South Asian University.

I first wrote a paper proposing the idea in 1992.

Later, it became a project connected to the Ford Foundation.

When Manmohan Singh became Prime Minister of India, Gawher Rizvi, who was then associated with the Ford Foundation and is Bangladeshi, became interested in the idea.

I was subsequently involved from the Bangladeshi side when the South Asian University was formally established in 2007.

But, unfortunately, I think the original idea was diluted.

Natasha Fernando

In what way?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

The original idea was not to create another conventional university in Delhi.

It was supposed to be something genuinely regional.

We pushed for the Charter to state that the **main campus** would be in Delhi, which implied that other campuses could be created elsewhere in South Asia.

But that did not happen.

The first Vice-Chancellor, although a distinguished academic, approached the university too much as an Indian institution rather than a South Asian one.

I once described it to him as becoming an **Indian University of South Asia**, rather than a genuinely South Asian University.

That was not the original vision.

The purpose was to create what I call a **South Asian mind**.

The disciplines should also have reflected that.

Instead, the university largely developed conventional departments such as economics and biochemistry.

Our original proposal was much more thematic.

We imagined faculties such as:

- Peace Studies
- Water Futures
- Comparative Religion

The idea was to create fields that addressed problems uniquely important to the region rather than simply reproducing the structure of existing national universities.

There were many people involved in developing those ideas.

We had Ashis Nandy from India, Jayadeva Uyangoda from Sri Lanka, Kanti Bajpai from India, Ajaya Dixit from Nepal, Zia Mian from Pakistan and others.

There were serious thinkers who wanted to imagine the university differently.

But bureaucracy eventually diluted the vision.

I am a patient person, however.

I still think that one day we may create the kind of institution that was originally imagined.

If South Asians begin to see that they can work together and benefit from one another's ideas, that can also revive SAARC.

Natasha Fernando

So in your view, the deeper problem is not simply institutional design but the lack of a genuinely regional consciousness?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Exactly.

To make SAARC meaningful for more than a billion people, we need a **South Asian mindset**.

The South Asian University Charter itself recognised that.

But developing such a mindset is not easy.

You have to create spaces in which people actually think regionally rather than nationally.

Natasha Fernando

That links to another area where cooperation may perhaps be easier: culture.

When we think about economics, trade and investment, states naturally prioritise national interest.

But cultural cooperation can sometimes develop even when political relations are difficult.

The SAARC Cultural Centre is based in Colombo, and in 2025 the SAARC Heritage Forum discussed creating cultural trails connecting Buddhist heritage sites and sacred sites associated with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and other traditions across South Asia.

That kind of project could encourage spiritual journeys and cultural tourism while also building regional identity.

It seems closely connected to your original idea of education and a South Asian University.

How important do you think cultural heritage could be for regional cooperation?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Culture is absolutely critical.

In fact, the first paper I wrote on this subject, back in 1982, was titled “**Reformulating Culture and Thought: A Plea for a South Asian University.**”

The region has forgotten how deeply connected its cultures are.

It is not only about Buddhist heritage.

Consider the Sufi traditions of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

Those histories are profoundly interconnected.

Musically, too, we share the same traditions.

The *raag* system—the basic structure of classical music—is recognisable from Lahore to Colombo, Kathmandu, Dhaka and Delhi.

You hear the tune and immediately understand the connection.

And then there is Rabindranath Tagore.

One Bengali poet influenced the national anthems of three South Asian countries.

He wrote the national anthems of Bangladesh and India, and the melody of Sri Lanka’s anthem has Tagorean influence.

That tells you something extraordinary about cultural interconnectedness.

Food is another obvious example.

Our cuisines are deeply connected.

Yet these cultural connections have not sufficiently shaped the regional mindset.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Water is another major shared issue.

That is why we imagined a Faculty of Water Futures.

South Asia is physically connected through water systems.

There are so many areas where regional thinking is essential.

But national bureaucracies have their own constraints and priorities.

My hope is that, eventually, governments will understand the value of investing more in education and regional consciousness.

Once you create a critical mass of people who genuinely think of themselves as South Asian, the possibilities expand enormously.

At present, however, South Asia is lagging behind.

We lag behind ASEAN.

We lag behind China in connectivity.

We continue to focus excessively on the negative parts of history rather than the positive ones.

Everything stops at the border.

Yet geopolitics itself is changing.

We are moving, at least potentially, from a geopolitics of conflict towards a geopolitics of cooperation.

That requires creativity.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

We are also more connected technologically than ever before.

Even this podcast is an example.

A Sri Lankan and a Bangladeshi can sit in different places and have a regional conversation instantly.

Ten or fifteen years ago that would have been much more difficult.

So the infrastructure of connection already exists.

The challenge is learning how to use it positively.

South Asia has enormous potential as a productive regional entity.

But we remain stuck.

That is why I keep returning to education and mindset.

Natasha Fernando

Let me offer one final reflection and turn it into a question.

We have been discussing the 40th anniversary of SAARC and the fact that the organisation is, as you say, “stuck”.

Yet there are certain problems that connect South Asia regardless of politics.

One of the clearest examples is **natural disasters**.

South Asian countries face cyclones, floods, landslides, earthquakes and other emergencies.

Sri Lanka recently experienced devastating flooding and cyclone-related destruction, with hundreds of lives lost.

In 2017, landslides and floods affected India, Bangladesh and Nepal simultaneously.

During these crises, we often see very practical forms of South-South cooperation.

India, for example, has provided emergency medical support, field hospitals and airlifted equipment to Sri Lanka during disasters.

So even when political cooperation fails, humanitarian assistance often works.

Do you see **humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—HADR—as an area where SAARC could regain practical relevance?**

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Absolutely.

We saw something similar during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was an online meeting of South Asian heads of government, and the pandemic made it very obvious that countries in the region are interconnected.

Diseases do not stop at borders.

Disasters do not stop at borders.

So humanitarian cooperation is essential.

But I would not want regional cooperation to depend only on crises.

Otherwise, we would have to wait for a disaster before South Asians work together.

I would rather see cooperation built around **development, opportunity and hope**.

Natasha Fernando

What would that look like?

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

For example, I have long argued for connecting South Asia through **high-speed rail**.

I am very familiar with China's high-speed railway system.

I have travelled regularly in China for more than 30 years and watched the system develop.

High-speed rail transformed the connectivity of the entire country.

The technology exists.

The financial capacity also exists.

If India and Pakistan spent even a little less on military confrontation, some of that money could be invested in regional infrastructure.

Imagine high-speed rail links connecting Dhaka, Delhi, Chattogram, Colombo and other major cities.

Technologically, this is possible.

What is lacking is political will.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

And connectivity matters for another reason.

South Asia has a serious problem with its **creative minds leaving the region**.

Much of the educated elite of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka send their children abroad.

Those young people then build their lives in Western countries rather than contributing directly to the region.

That creates a serious development problem.

You need people with both feet on the ground in their own societies if you want long-term transformation.

China has demonstrated that very clearly.

Some Southeast Asian countries have as well.

South Asia needs to create conditions in which talented young people want to stay.

That means giving them opportunity, infrastructure and a sense of possibility.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

The technology is there.

The economic understanding is increasingly there.

What is missing are perhaps three things:

- political will,
- the right mindset,
- and sufficiently ambitious regional institutions.

If those pieces come together, the kind of conversation we are having today may one day become unnecessary.

Instead of asking why South Asia cannot cooperate, we might be asking how quickly we can travel from Dhaka to Colombo.

That is the kind of future we should imagine.

Unfortunately, at present, violent non-state actors sometimes appear to be better connected across South Asia than constructive political and intellectual forces.

That is the tragedy.

But I remain hopeful.

We understand many of the problems.

What we need now are the right people at the political level who are willing to act.

Natasha Fernando

Professor Ahmed, thank you very much.

Your reflections draw on an extraordinary amount of regional experience, including your time working in Colombo and your long engagement with South Asian politics and institutions.

What stands out from this conversation is the importance of **mindset, education, culture, connectivity and political will**.

Forty years after SAARC's creation, perhaps the greatest question is not simply whether the organisation survives institutionally, but whether South Asians can still imagine themselves as part of a shared regional project.

Thank you once again for joining the South Asia Democratic Forum Podcast.

We hope to continue these conversations about South Asian cooperation, regional identity and the kinds of institutions that could make cooperation meaningful in practice.

Thank you very much for being with us.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

Thank you. Take care. Bye-bye.