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Q7(a)

Why South Asia is considered as the world's politically and economically least integrated region? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · India and South Asia

India and South Asia: Regional Co-operation; South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; South Asian Economic cooperation; Impediments to regional co-operation; India and the Look East / Act East policy.

Core demand of the question

- Why is South Asia the least integrated region in the world?
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

India-Pakistan conflict is the structural political cause.

SAARC consensus turns that dyad into a regional freeze.

Asymmetry and China-as-hedge weaken a single market bargain.

SAFTA holes and infrastructure gaps keep official trade thin.

ASEAN and **BIMSTEC** show that geography is not destiny; politics is.

Introduction

South Asia trades little with itself, builds few regional public goods, and lets **SAARC** stall. Least integrated is a relative claim against ASEAN or the EU. The causes are political first, then economic and geographic.

Body

The political lock

- India-Pakistan conflict, including Kashmir, nuclearisation, and terror incidents, makes consensus in **SAARC** a veto machine.
- 2016's cancelled Islamabad summit after Uri is a symbol, not the only freeze.
- **Asymmetry**: India is most of the region's GDP and military weight. Neighbours fear a market that is a hegemon. India fears a club that equals a small State with a large one.

Why ASEAN looks different

- ASEAN found a way to sit together after intra-mural war memories. South Asia never buried 1947-71.
- Extra-regional China offers smaller States a hedge, which thins the incentive to build a tight South Asian market.
- **BIMSTEC** and BBIN grew as work-arounds, which itself proves **SAARC**'s failure as the integration vehicle.

Economic and physical barriers

- Sensitive lists under **SAFTA**, non-tariff barriers, and poor last-mile rail and road keep official intra-trade thin.
- Energy grids and inland waterways exist in pieces, not as a region-wide system.
- Informal trade and third-country routing (often via Dubai or Singapore) show demand that policy blocks.

Identity and people

- Visas, distrust, and communal politics slow people integration even where language and kinship run across borders.
- Cross-border ethnic conflict, as with Rohingya and north-east insurgencies, securitises mobility.

Theoretical reading

- Karl Deutsch's security community needs trust. South Asia has a security complex, in Barry Buzan's sense, centred on India-Pakistan.
- Functionalists hoped trade would spill over. Politics here blocks the first spill.

What "least" does not mean

- Some pairs - India-Bhutan, a warmer India-Bangladesh trade patch - integrate more. The regional average remains low.

Flow diagram

India-Pakistan veto -> SAARC stall
 Indian asymmetry -> SAARC stall
 SAARC stall -> Low intra-trade
 NTBs visas -> Low intra-trade
 Low intra-trade -> Least integrated region
 BIMSTEC bypass -.partial. -> Least integrated region

Conclusion

South Asia is least integrated because India-Pakistan rivalry vetoes **SAARC**, asymmetry breeds fear, and non-tariff and visa walls keep markets apart. ASEAN's process success is the foil. **BIMSTEC** is the bypass, not a full substitute for a South Asian economy.

Facts & figures

SAARC

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; summit process repeatedly stalled by India-Pakistan politics.

SAFTA

Free-trade attempt with long sensitive lists that limit intra-regional commerce.

BIMSTEC

Bay of Bengal grouping without Pakistan, used as an integration bypass.

ASEAN foil

Higher intra-trade and denser diplomacy despite diversity, the usual contrast in this question.

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