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Q7(a)

Discuss the future of SAARC in the light of India's increased focus on other regional groupings like ASEAN and BIMSTEC.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Regionalisation of World Politics

Regionalisation of World Politics: EU, ASEAN, APEC, SAARC, NAFTA.

Core demand of the question

- State SAARC's original purpose and why it has stalled (Pakistan, terrorism, connectivity veto)
- Explain India's turn to ASEAN and **BIMSTEC**
- **Discuss SAARC's future:** frozen, bypassed, not formally abolished

Revision summary

SAARC aimed at South Asian cooperation but stalled because of India-Pakistan hostility and terrorism-related diplomatic freeze.

ASEAN is India's **Act East** and Indo-Pacific diplomatic centre.

BIMSTEC offers Bay of Bengal connectivity without Pakistan.

India is practising variable geometry, not a formal abolition of SAARC.

SAARC's future is frozen and technical at best unless the Pakistan political file changes.

Introduction

SAARC was meant to be South Asia's regional club: trade, people and a soft security community among India and its neighbours, with Pakistan inside the room. India's increased focus on ASEAN and BIMSTEC is a response to SAARC's **political freeze**. The future of SAARC is therefore the future of a body that still exists on paper and barely works in practice.

Body**Why SAARC stalled**

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation never matched **ASEAN's** convening success or the **EU's** legal depth (4(c)). India-Pakistan hostility, especially after cross-border terrorism and the post-2016 diplomatic freeze, made summits impossible. Connectivity and a serious free-trade practice could not outrun the security veto. Smaller members feared Indian dominance; India feared a ganging-up with extra-regional players. SAARC became a **lowest-common-denominator calendar**.

ASEAN and BIMSTEC as substitutes

ASEAN is the diplomatic centre of **Act East** and of the **Indo-Pacific** claim in 5(d). It offers markets, a China-balancing room, and a method (consensus) that does not require Pakistan. **BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Initiative) links India to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan - the eastern and Bay neighbourhood **without Pakistan**. Energy, coastal

shipping and the northeast's outlet are the practical files. For Delhi, **BIMSTEC** is SAARC minus the blockage, plus a Southeast Asian hinge.

- **This is rational** variable geometry. **It is also a signal to Islamabad:** regionalism will proceed around you. Neighbours still use SAARC language when they want a South Asian roof that includes Pakistan. They use **BIMSTEC** when they want projects.

Future of SAARC

Legal death is unlikely; no member wants the funeral. **Functional future** is poor unless India-Pakistan politics thaw, which is not the 2020s baseline. SAARC may survive as a **humanitarian and technical** label (health, standards) and as a dormant summit. India's primary regional bets will remain **BIMSTEC, ASEAN, IORA and bilateral neighbourhood first**. **The honest discussion: SAARC's future is marginal**, not resurrected, unless the Pakistan file changes. India should not spend political capital pretending otherwise, and should not insult smaller members who still value a South Asian name.

Flow diagram

SAARC -> Pakistan terrorism freeze
India -> ASEAN Act East Act East
India -> BIMSTEC without Pakistan
BIMSTEC without Pakistan -> Working regionalism
SAARC -> Marginal future

Conclusion

SAARC stalled on the India-Pakistan security veto. ASEAN and **BIMSTEC** give India working regionalism aligned with **Act East** and the Bay of Bengal. SAARC will likely remain a frozen brand rather than a dead treaty. Its future is limited unless politics with Pakistan change.

Facts & figures

SAARC 1985

Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; summits have been repeatedly postponed.

BIMSTEC

Bay of Bengal grouping that includes India and eastern neighbours but not Pakistan.

Act East

Policy that privileges ASEAN-centred regionalism over a stalled South Asian club.