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REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA: STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

Interconnected characteristics of environmental problems of a region demand cooperation among the countries of that region. The South Asian region is considered as the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change-induced hazards, at the same time, the countries are also facing enormous environmental crises which are not confined within the borders of any particular country. To address the challenges of regional environmental cooperation in South Asia and strengthen it, an evaluation of existing cooperation is of great importance. It is in this background, the present paper aims to evaluate the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia with a view to identifying its strengths, weaknesses and challenges. Increasing recognition of the importance of environmental issues resulting in increased attempts for regional cooperation, the presence of a broad spectrum of regional environmental cooperation initiatives and Track I-Track II cooperation have been found as the strength of the existing regional initiatives. Major weaknesses include lack of concrete action, political and financial challenges and lacking in selection of appropriate programmes. On the other hand, geostrategic challenges, Inter-state relations and the hegemonistic status of a particular country have been found to be the major impediments to regional environmental cooperation in the South Asian region.

Keywords: South Asia, Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, Track I Diplomacy, Track II Diplomacy

1. Introduction

South Asian region with its vast topographical diversity has diverse climatic variations ranging from tropical monsoon in the south to cold temperatures in the north. There are also some distinct climatic zones which appear regionally. The physical and climatic diversities have infused the South Asian region with varied environmental problems and climate change impacts.

Nearly one-third of the people who live in extreme poverty worldwide live in South Asia.¹ Poverty and its consequences on natural resources are also sources of

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¹ "Poverty measures in South Asia," The World Bank, accessed June 20, 2022,

https://worldbank.github.io/SARMD_guidelines/poverty-measures.html

environmental degradation in this region. In addition to that, South Asia houses some of the most polluted countries in the world. India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh are amongst the top five most polluted countries around the world. The region has also failed to maintain its air quality, 42 out of the 50 cities with the poorest air quality are in South Asia.²

The South Asian countries also face a wide range of climate change-induced hazards too. The region is extremely vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of climate change. Half of the population of the South Asian region is affected every year by extreme climate-related events such as heatwaves, storms, floods, fires and drought which also created a burden for the economies of the countries of the region.³ The major impact of global warming and climate change the region is facing is the increase in temperature which accelerates the melting of the Himalayan glaciers. Loss of glaciers and seasonal snow is creating significant risks not just to the people who live at the foothills of the mountains, but it also affects the broader stability of water resources in the South Asian region.⁴ Particularly, sea-level rising imposes a major threat to the South Asian countries as it creates threats for the island countries like the Maldives and Sri Lanka to be submerged and inundation of coastal areas in Bangladesh. The South Asian region is also extremely prone to seasonal natural disasters such as cyclones, floods and landslides. Data show that the region accounted for over 60 per cent of disaster-related deaths worldwide during the 1990 decade.⁵

Environmental problems surpass political boundaries, for this, the solution and management of these problems should also be holistic which will include all countries of the region that are facing similar problems. In the case of South Asia, there are several sationorganisations and programmes aimed at regional environmental cooperation which involve both Track I and Track II actors. These regional organisations and programmes are suffering from varied challenges, most important of which is the lack of integration among the countries. As a result, the regional organisations and initiatives have so far seen limited success.

² “Doctors For Clean Air & Climate Action, Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), Lung Care Foundation, Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) & Fossil Fuel Treaty,” Regional Collaboration of Health Professionals for Resolving South Asia’s Air Pollution & Climate Crisis, Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs) accessed June 21, 2022, https://cansouthasia.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/RCoHP-South-Asia-Report_06-09-2021.pdf

³ “Teaching Climate Change in South Asia,” Unicef, October 13, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/teaching-climate-change-south-asia>

⁴ “To Slow Himalayan Glacier Melt, Curbing Air Pollution is Key,” Press Release, The World Bank, October 14, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/06/01/to-slow-himalayan-glacier-melt-curbing-air-pollution-is-key>

⁵ “About Us,” South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme, accessed June 22, 2022, www.sacep.org/about-us

To address the challenges of regional environmental cooperation in South Asia and strengthen it, an evaluation of existing cooperation is of great importance, but literature review suggests that literature is scarce on this topic. It is in this background, the present paper aims to evaluate the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia. To be more precise, it attempts to identify the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of existing regional environmental cooperation in the South Asian region.

The paper is qualitative in nature and based on secondary information sources including books, journal articles, reports and websites of various organisations and daily newspapers. The paper consists of six sections including an introduction and conclusion. Following the introduction, the second section of the paper deals with the concepts regarding regional environmental cooperation. The third section provides an overview of the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia. Section four identifies the strengths and weaknesses of environmental cooperation in South Asia and section five identifies the challenges. Section six concludes the paper.

2. Regional Environmental Cooperation in Context

Environmental cooperation can be described as “collaborative efforts across national boundaries in order to address shared ecological concerns”.⁶ Regional cooperation, on the other hand, is defined in dictionaries as political and institutional mechanisms which countries in a general geographical region devise to find and strengthen common interests as well as promoting their national interests, through mutual cooperation and dialogue.⁷ Therefore, regional environmental cooperation can be defined as collaborative efforts and institutional mechanisms that countries of particular regions use to cooperate on common environmental issues.

Globally, there has been an increasing recognition that the trans-boundary environmental problems call for regional and international cooperation. Several reasons lie behind this recognition. First, the growing industrial and economic development often results in environmental degradation whose impacts are felt beyond the borders of single countries. Issues like pollution in international waters and trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes and chemicals call for cooperation among bordering countries. Second, globally, regional environmental cooperation has come to be regarded as one of the major channels for promoting environmental security. The analysts of environmental peacemaking studies have

⁶ Karen M. Siegel, *Regional Environmental Cooperation in South America: Processes, Drivers and constraints* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

⁷ “What is Regional Cooperation,” IGI Global, accessed July 12, 2022, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/exploring-landscapes-in-regional-convergence/55672#:~:text=Regional%20cooperation%20refers%20to%20the,through%20mutual%20cooperation%20and%20dialogue>.

claimed that working together on shared environmental challenges, can facilitate more peaceful relations between them.⁸ Asian Development Bank (ADB) has introduced environmental cooperation as one of its new dimensions for its Regional Cooperation and Integration Index.⁹ Third, regional environmental cooperation can have a spillover impact on a global scale. For example, the European Union (EU)'s joint regional greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets will have a global impact on GHG emissions. Finally, Agenda 21,¹⁰ adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1993, also signifies the significant role of regional cooperation in environment and development.

Different scholars have studied regional and international cooperation in environment. Monica Tennberg's research, for example, was aimed at assessing international environmental cooperation and she identified four major categories to measure the cooperation- sustainability, efficiency, fairness, and robustness.¹¹ Najam et al., on the other hand, observes that despite the huge achievement of Global Environment Governance (GEG) system in recent days in terms of number of treaties, fund and presence of more participatory systems, global environmental degradation continues. To address this dilemma, they called for reform focusing on deeper-rooted, longer-term institutional change including improved implementation of existing environmental instruments, better incorporation of non-state actors and meaningful mainstreaming of the environmental agenda into other policy streams.¹² There are also a number of studies focusing on regional level. For example, Lorraine Elliott has tried to explore the relationship between ideas, interests and policy in ASEAN's environmental cooperation studying the identity-based accounts of regional cooperation and.¹³ Kazu Kato and Wakana Takahashi have studied the regional/sub-regional environmental cooperation in Asia and the Pacific taking into account all of the major regional and sub-regional initiatives.¹⁴ Henriette Litta in her book "Regimes in Southeast Asia: An Analysis of Environmental Cooperation"

⁸ Tobias Ide, "The impact of environmental cooperation on peacemaking: Definitions, mechanisms, and empirical evidence," *International Studies Review* 21, Issue 3 (September 2019): 327-346.

⁹ ADB, *New Approaches to Measuring and Assessing Regional Cooperation and Integration*, (Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2020) <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/650151/measuring-assessing-rci-workshop.pdf>

¹⁰ United Nations, *AGENDA 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development; Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; and Statement of Forest Principles*, (New York: United Nations Publications, 1993), <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/outcomedocuments/agenda21>.

¹¹ Monica Tennberg, "International environmental cooperation in northwest Russia: an assessment of performance," *Polar Record* 43, Issue 3 (July 2007): 231-238.

¹² Adil Najam, Mihaela Papa and Nadaa Taiyab, *Global Environmental Governance* (Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2006).

¹³ Lorraine Elliott, "ASEAN and environmental cooperation: norms, interests and identity," *The Pacific Review* 16, no. 1 (2003): 29-52

¹⁴ Kazu Kato and Wakana Takahashi, "An Overview of Regional/Subregional Environmental Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific," accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/discussionpaper/en/923/overview_asia_pacific.pdf

applies the regime theory in ASEAN's environmental cooperation.¹⁵ Lyuba Zarsky and Jason Hunter on the other hand studied the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and identified three tasks necessary for successful environmental cooperation which include building common norms, increasing environmental capacities, and coordinating domestic resource and environmental policy in sectors heavily involved in regional trade and investment."¹⁶

In the literature on regional cooperation in general, and environmental cooperation in particular, increasing emphasis on role of Track II can be noticed.¹⁷ Shantanu Chakrabarti observes that in the post-Cold War period viewing the irreversible globalisation process, regional cooperation has become one of the primary imperatives and Track II initiatives can help to create a favourable climate for regional cooperation, however due to its extensiveness the role of Track I diplomacy can also not be ruled out.¹⁸

Ted Hsuan Yun Chen examines the relationship between Track I and Track II diplomacy in the Asia Pacific region using a data set constructed from diplomatic meeting records and found that the two tracks of diplomacy are mutually reinforcing which implies that Track II diplomacy facilitate and strengthen Track I diplomacy.¹⁹ Karen M. Siegel had similar findings for environmental cooperation and puts emphasis on growing interaction between state and non-state actors and opines that environmental cooperation between Southern governments is driven by a variety of actors including NGOs, researchers, donors and international organisations.²⁰

Based on existing literature on the role of Track I and Track II initiatives in environmental cooperation, the following framework can be proposed to explain and evaluate the regional cooperation in environmental sector (see Figure 1). The Track

¹⁵ Henriette Litta, *Regimes in Southeast Asia: An Analysis of Environmental Cooperation* (Berlin: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2012).

¹⁶ Lyuba Zarsky and Jason Hunter, "Environmental Cooperation at APEC: The First Five Years," *Journal of Environment & Development* 6, No. 3 (September 1997): 222-251.

¹⁷ Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007); Diane Stone and Helen E S Nesadurai, "Networks, Second Track Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation: The Experience of Southeast Asian Think Tanks," (paper presented to the Inaugural Conference on Bridging Knowledge and Policy organised by the Global Development Network, Bonn, Germany, 5-8 December 1999); Obsatar Sinaga, Tirta N. Mursitama and Maisa Yudono, "Epistemic Community and the Role of Second Track Diplomacy in East Asia Economic Cooperation," *World Applied Sciences Journal* 28, no. 1 (2013): 36-44; Muhammad Sajjad Malik, "Track II diplomacy and its impact on Pakistan India peace Process," *Strategic Studies* (2011), Paula Hanasz, "A little Less Conversation? Track II Dialogue and Transboundary Water Governance," *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 296-309.

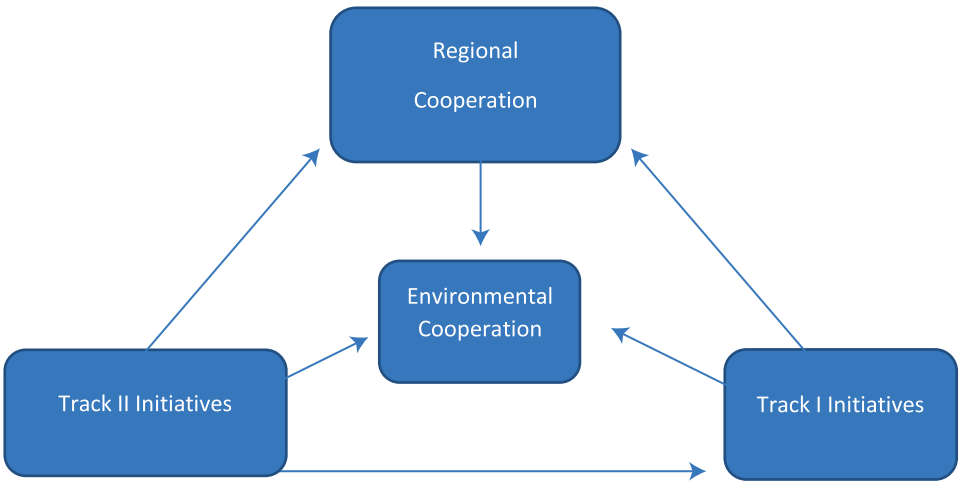
¹⁸ Shantanu Chakrabarti, "The Relevance of Track II Diplomacy in South Asia," *International Studies* 40, no. 3, (2003): 265 – 276.

¹⁹ Ted Hsuan Yun Chen, "Informal Diplomacy Reinforces Formal International Cooperation: Evidence from Track Two Diplomacy," March 16, 2021, accessed July 08, 2022, <https://osf.io/647gt/download>

²⁰ Karen M. Siegel, *Regional Environmental Cooperation in South America: Processes, Drivers and Constraints* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Track I initiatives exert direct influence on environmental cooperation while Track II initiatives have both direct and indirect influence (through initiating/impacting a Track I initiative). Environmental cooperation in turn, can be influenced by regional cooperation in general which might be subsequently influenced by Track I and Track II environment initiatives through a process akin to environmental peacebuilding.

Figure 1: Regional Cooperation on Environment



3. Regional Environmental Cooperation Initiatives in South Asia: A Brief Overview

To resolve the environmental degradation and climate change-induced crisis, regional cooperation initiatives have been taken both at the government and non-state levels in the South Asian region. All the organisations have policies for sustainable use and management of natural resources for the long-term well-being of the countries and region as a whole. This section aims to give an overview of the regional environmental cooperation initiatives in South Asia. First, it provides a chronological overview of the regional inter-governmental (Track I) organisations including the major regional inter-governmental (Track I) environment initiatives. Then, it will deal with the regional non-government (Track II) initiatives.

3.1 *Track I Regional Organisationsations*

3.1.1 *South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP)*

In the late 1970s, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) regional office for Asia and Pacific took the primary initiatives to establish an organisationsation for environmental cooperation in South Asia. In the South Asia Co-operative Intergovernmental Expert Group Meeting, held in Bangalore, India in March 1980, the decision was taken to establish South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) with Sri Lanka as the Secretariat. The inter-governmental organisationsation, after becoming a legal entity in 1982, focused on areas such as environmental education, loss of biodiversity, air pollution, environmental legislation, and the protection and management of the coastal environment. The type of activities that the organisationsation engages in include capacity building, awareness-raising and exchange of information and expertise.

Immediately after the establishment of SACEP, Sri Lanka, the secretariat country of the organisationsation witnessed an escalated ethnic crisis which brought the activities of SACEP near a standstill until the organisationsation revived itself in the 1990s with an Action Plan called SACEP Strategy and Program. The Program, however, could not yield much success; one major reason being its focus on too many issues at a time.²¹

In the following years, however, the SACEP took some significant efforts. One success of the organisation was to adopt the Malé declaration on control and prevention of air pollution in 1998. The organisation also acts as the secretariat of some major regional environment initiatives in South Asia including the South Asian Seas Program (SASP) and South Asian Coral Reef Task Force (SACRF).²²

3.1.1.1 *South Asian Seas Programme (SASP)*

South Asian Seas Programme (SASP) is one of the 18 Regional Seas Programme of UNEP and started its journey in South Asia back in 1982. Action Plan for SASP was adopted by five marine South Asian countries including Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 1995.²³ SACEP was designated as the secretariat for the implementation of the Action Plan.²⁴

²¹ Ashok Swain, "Environmental Cooperation in South Asia," in *Environmental Peacemaking*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 75

²² Hussain Shihab, "South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme" in *Harmonising Environment and Development in South Asia*, ed. K.H. J. Wijayadasa (Colombo: SACEP, 1997), 315-322.

²³ "South Asian Seas Programme – An Overview," South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme, accessed June 25, 2022, www.sacep.org/programmes/south-asian-seas

²⁴ Kazu Kato and Wakana Takahashi, "An Overview of Regional/Subregional Environmental Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific," accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/discussionpaper/en/923/overview_asia_pacific.pdf

The main objectives of the initiative are protecting and managing the marine environment and related coastal ecosystem of South Asia in an environmentally sound and sustainable manner. The four specific priority activities areas include managing the coastal zone, protecting the marine environment from land-based activities, human resources development through regional centres excellences and facilitating development of national and regional oil and chemical spill contingency plan. Under the SASP programme, the member countries signed an MOU for cooperation in response to oil spills and chemical pollutionsation and developed Regional Oil and Chemical Pollution Spill Contingency Plan.²⁵

3.1.1.2 South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF)

The South Asia Coral Reef Task Force (SACRTF), with the participation of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, was established in January 2007 for facilitating the implementation and management of various initiatives related with coral reef and related ecosystems in the region and promoting collaborative actions and trans-boundary responses to the environmental challenges. For this programme too, SACEP acts as the secretariat.

3.1.2 International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)

In 1974, at an international workshop on the development of the mountain environment in Munich, Germany an idea was discussed about establishing an institution for promoting an ecologically sound development of the mountainous region. The Centre was finally established in 1983 with Nepal as the host and funds coming from the Government of Switzerland, Federal Republic of Germany and UNESCO.

ICIMOD, a regional inter-governmental organisation, comprised of eight countries of the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan - aims to mitigate the impact of globalisation and climate change on the livelihoods of mountain people as well as on the fragile ecosystem of HKH region. Besides acting as a regional hub for knowledge and experience sharing, the organisation supports the implementation of regional transboundary programs by forming partnerships with other regional partner institutions.²⁶

3.1.3 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 as a political and economic cooperation organisation which

²⁵ Prasantha Dias Abeyegunawardene, "South Asian Regional Seas Programme" in *Harmonising Environment and Development in South Asia*, ed. K.H.J. Wijayadasa (Colombo: SACEP, 1997), 323-342.

²⁶ "Our Vision," ICIMOD, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.icimod.org/who-we-are/vision-mission/>

gradually broadened its scope and incorporated environmental issues as part of its agenda. During the third SAARC Summit in 1987, the Heads of States or Governments, recognizing the gravity of the challenges posed by natural disasters, global warming and climate change, commissioned a regional study titled 'Consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of the Environment'. Another joint study titled 'Greenhouse Effect and its Impact on the Region' was directed at the Fourth SAARC Summit. These two regional studies basically provided an evaluation of the environmental condition of the SAARC member states.

In 1992, a technical committee on the environment was formed to identify measures for immediate action and modalities of implementation of the recommendations of the regional studies. At the same time, the Environment Ministers began to meet periodically for reviewing the progress and find ways to enhance regional collaboration on environment, climate change and natural disaster issues. The 'SAARC Environment Action Plan', adopted in the Third Meeting of the SAARC Environment Ministers held in 1997, identified some of the key concerns of the region and set parameters and modalities for regional cooperation.

In the following two decades, the organisation adopted few more declaration / statement/ conventions - 'Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change' in 2008, 'Delhi Statement on Cooperation in Environment' in 2009, 'Thimphu Statement on Climate Change' in 2010 and 'The SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment' in 2010. Although Various declarations and studies adopted and conducted by SAARC keep the environment issue in the agenda of the regional organisation, the measures recommended in those declarations and studies were hardly taken seriously at the political level.²⁷ It is also indicated by the fact that the SAARC Environment Ministers' meeting has not taken place since September 2011.

SAARC has established various Centers and monitoring cells for implementing the environmental initiatives which include SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC) in 1995, SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) in 2004, SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in 2006 and SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC) in 2007. In 2014, all the above-mentioned four centers were merged into a single Centre which was named SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Centre (SEDMC). Table 1 provides a brief description of the four centers of SAARC.

²⁷ Ashok Swain, "Environmental Cooperation in South Asia," in *Environmental Peacemaking*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 61-85.

3.2 *Track II Regional Initiatives*

3.2.1 *IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM-SA)*

With the aim of improving the knowledge base on ecosystem conservation and healthy ecosystems, the South Asian regional Network of the IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM-SA), was established. This regional platform prioritized the concerns, challenges and prospects of ecosystem management and transboundary conservation efforts in the South Asian region.

3.2.2 *South Asia Youth Environment Network (SAYEN)*

The South Asia Youth Environment Network (SAYEN) was established in July 2002 with the support of UNEP for effective participation of the youth in the decision-making process and the promotion of sustainable development in South Asia. The network, hosted by Centre for Environment Education (CEE), India, has over 1500 members from all eight SAARC countries consisting of youth organisations, individual, national and international agencies. SAYEN focuses on capacity building among the youth through networking, information sharing, developing resource materials and awareness raising.

3.2.3 *Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs)*

Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs), a coalition of 300 civil society organisations of eight SAARC countries, was initiated with the aim to promote equity and social justice, sustainable development of all communities and protecting the environment. CANSAs represents the southern perspectives very actively in the international climate negotiations and undertakes inter-governmental, regional and national actions.

3.2.4 *Regional Initiatives on Trans-boundary Rivers*

There are some regional initiatives focusing mainly on the issue of trans-boundary water resources of the South Asian region. In 2004, South Asian Water Analysis Network (SAWAN), with complementary funding from the US Department of Energy and participation of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, was established for monitoring the transboundary river water quality of the Ganges basin.

The South Asia Water Governance Programme (SAWGP), funded by the UK, involves better management of the three primary Himalayan rivers (the Ganges, Indus and Brahmaputra) shared by seven countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan). It started operation in 2012, bringing the seven countries together for increasing cooperation to tackle trans-boundary

challenges like flooding, water for irrigation and maximizing hydropower potential and minimizing climate change impacts.

The World Bank administered the South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI), a multi-donor trust fund with the support of the United Kingdom, Australia and Norway, worked for more than a decade to increase regional cooperation in managing major Himalayan River systems and build climate resilience. The SAWI run its activities in seven countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan and worked on the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaptra river basins and Sundarbans wetlands. Its activities included awareness raising, capacity building, supporting dialogue and scoping investment of the World Bank.

One deficiency that remains is that the regional initiatives on transboundary rivers focus mainly on water sharing while environmental issues like water pollution, river bank erosion, protection of flora and fauna receives less attention.

4. South Asia Regional Environmental Cooperation: Strengths and Weaknesses

Regional cooperation in any particular region is initiated to enhance relations in the cultural, economic and security arenas. The interconnected nature of the environmental crisis has brought itself to the forefront in any kind of cooperation initiatives. This section will evaluate the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia. It will first look into the trends of the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia. Then it will identify the strengths, weaknesses and challenges faced by the existing regional organisations and initiatives.

To help identify the strengths and weaknesses in regional environmental cooperation in South Asia, Figure 2 and Table 1 have been constructed based on the discussion of the previous section. Figure 2 shows the time-line of regional cooperation in South Asia while Table 1 presents the summary of the overview of the regional cooperation as described in section 3.

Figure 2: Time-line of Regional Cooperation in South Asia



4.1 *Regional Environmental Cooperation in South Asia: The Strengths*

4.1.1 *Increased recognition of environmental concerns*

It cannot be denied that with respect to environmental cooperation in South Asia, one of the major developments in the past decades is the increasing recognition of the importance of environmental concern which has been reflected in increased attempts for regional cooperation in this regard, whether successful or not. Figure 2 shows that in the region the number of Track II initiatives for regional environmental cooperation has been on rise since the 2000s. It can also be seen that the rise in such cooperation is more pronounced in the last two decades. Worldwide, growing evidence of climate change and environmental degradation and their impacts on people's lives and livelihoods are increasing the pressure for environmental cooperation at both Track I and Track II level. Though it is comforting to notice similar pressure in South Asia; it is needed to see to what extent has the increased recognition of importance of regional environmental cooperation resulted in concrete action which will be done in the next section.

4.1.2 *Broad spectrum of regional cooperation*

From Table 1 the presence of a broad spectrum of regional environmental cooperation in South Asia can be noticed (See Table 1, column 4 and 5). There are organisations which are comprehensive in nature (For example SACEP, SAARC, CANSA) as well as there are organisations and programmes which are complementary in terms of participants, actors, scope and area of intervention (for example, ICIMOD, SASP, SAWI). The boundary between these two types of cooperation, however, is not always strict and clear. It can be seen from the discussion of the previous section that some major regional initiatives, which are non-comprehensive by nature (for example, SASP, and SACRTE), are implemented by a structure which is of comprehensive nature (SACEP). Together, all the regional bodies and initiatives as listed in section 3, cover a wide range of subjects, activities and actors which, if properly utilized, can become a strength for regional environmental cooperation in South Asia.

Table 1: Historical Timeline and a Brief Overview of Regional Environmental Cooperation in South Asia

Year of establishment	Name and nature of the Regional Cooperation	Funded / Initiated by	Participants*	Main Areas of Action	Type of Action	Major Initiatives
Track I Regional Organisations						
1982	SACEP (Inter-governmental organisation)	UNEP	All eight SAARC countries	Environmental education, legislation, biodiversity, air pollution, protection and management of coastal environment	Capacity building, awareness raising, information exchange, formulation and financing of environmental projects ²⁸	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adoption of Male Declaration on control and prevention of air pollution in 1998 2. Formulation and implementation of major regional programs such as <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) South Asian Seas Program ii) South Asian Coral Reef Task Force iii) South Asia Biodiversity Clearing House Mechanism iv) South Asia Network for

²⁸ Ashok Swain, "Environmental Cooperation in South Asia," in *Environmental Peacemaking*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 61-85.

Year of establishment	Name and nature of the Regional Cooperation	Funded / Initiated by	Participants*	Main Areas of Action	Type of Action	Major Initiatives
SACEP Initiatives	SASP (1995)	UNEP	BD, IN, ML, PK, SL	Protection and management of marine environment and coastal zones, Human resource development, development of oil and chemical spill contingency	Research, policy formulation, system design, awareness raising	Security and Climate Change v) International Partnership for Expanding Waste Management Services of Local Authorities ²⁹ i) MOU for cooperation among ML, BD, SR and PK in response to oil spill and chemical pollution ii) Development of Regional Oil and Chemical Pollution Spill Contingency Plan iii) Blue Flag Beach Conservation Programme
	SACRTF (2007)		BD, IN, ML, PK, SL	Facilitate implementation and		

²⁹ Hussain Shihab, "South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme" in *Harmonising Environment and Development in South Asia*, ed. K.H.J. Wijayadasa (Colombo: SACEP, 1997), 315-322.

Year of establishment	Name and nature of the Regional Cooperation	Funded / Initiated by	Participants*	Main Areas of Action	Type of Action	Major Initiatives
1983	ICIMOD (Inter-governmental organisation)	UNESCO, governments of Switzerland and Germany	BD, IN, PK, BH, NP, AF, CH, MY	management of coral reef regions and related ecosystem Impact of globalisation and climate change on HKH mountain ecosystem and livelihoods	Knowledge hub, experience sharing, supporting transboundary programs	i) The Himalayan Climate Change Adaptation Programme (HICAP) ii) The Atmosphere Initiative.
1985	SAARC (Inter-governmental organisation)		BD, IN, PK, BH, NP, SR, ML, AF			
SAARC Centres	(SMIRC (1995))		All eight SAARC countries	Weather prediction and better understanding of monsoon	Exchange of information	
	(SCZMC (2004))			Planning, management and sustainable development of coastal zones	Research, training and awareness	
	(SDMC (2006))			Providing policy advice and facilitating capacity	Strategic learning, research, training,	

Year of establishment	Name and nature of the Regional Cooperation	Funded / Initiated by	Participants*	Main Areas of Action	Type of Action	Major Initiatives
				building	exchange of information and expertise	
	(SFC (2007)			Protection, conservation and sustainable management of forest	Research, education and coordination	
	SEDMC (2014)			Merge of SMRC, SCZMC, SDMC and SFC		
Track II Regional Initiatives						
2002	SAYEN (non-government network)	CEE, India	All eight SAARC countries	Capacity building of the youth	Networking, information sharing, developing materials and awareness raising	
	CANSA (non-government network)	BCAS, Bangladesh	All eight SAARC countries	Research, advocacy, capacity building of member organisations, develop linkages	Networking, development and sharing of knowledge and expertise	
2004	SAWAN (non-government)	USA	BD, IN, NP, PK	Monitoring transboundary river water quality in Ganges	Research, information sharing	

Year of establishment	Name and nature of the Regional Cooperation initiative)	Funded / Initiated by	Participants*	Main Areas of Action	Type of Action	Major Initiatives
2012	SAWGP (non-government initiative)	UK	AF, BD, BH, CH, IN, NP, PK	basin Flooding, irrigation, hydropower		
2011	SAWI (non-government initiative)	World Bank	AF, BD, BH, CH, IN, NP, PK	Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra basin, wetland Sunderbans river		

* BD – Bangladesh, IN – India, PK – Pakistan, SR – Sri Lanka, BH – Bhutan, NP -Nepal, AF – Afghanistan, ML – Maldives, MY – Myanmar, CH – China

4.1.3 Cooperation between Government and Non-Government Actors

After the end of the cold war, Track II initiatives flourished in many sectors playing an important role in forging regional cooperation in various sectors including environment. Though in South Asia, such Track II processes are yet to play significant roles in influencing regional politics; with respect to environmental cooperation, it is emerging as a significant driver which has been reflected in their increasing role as agents or initiator of cooperation. Their growing role is reflected not only by the increased number of Track II regional bodies and initiatives; in many cases, the Track I cooperation was also initiated by Track II actors which was the case not only with ICIMOD and SASP but also with SACEP, one of the two most comprehensive regional cooperation in South Asia (see column 3 of Table 1). It may also be noticed from Figure 1 and Table 1 that compared to Track I initiatives, more initiatives are now coming from Track II actors. While in some cases, the initiatives are purely Track II by nature (for example, SAYEN and CANSA), in other cases, Track II actors are involving heavily the Track I actors (for example, SAWAN and SAWGP).

4.2 Weaknesses in the Existing Cooperation

4.2.1 Lack of Concrete Action

In South Asia, the growing recognition of the importance of regional environmental cooperation has not resulted in commensurate concrete regional action. This is reflected in the type of activities of the regional bodies and initiatives. The type of activities of the existing regional environmental bodies and programmes of South Asia suggest that they are more focused on activities like research, policy making, information sharing, capacity building and awareness-raising (see Table 1, column 6). Putting it differently, they are more of knowledge hubs and advocacy clubs than of action clubs. Existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia is, therefore, yet to play a role in the implementation frontier.

4.2.2 Lack of region-wide organisations

As environmental issues are interlinked, it is better to be addressed in a comprehensive approach. Regional cooperation in the environment in South Asia faces challenges in this regard. While there are several successful cooperations of non-comprehensive nature, the region lacks comprehensive regional bodies capable of moving ahead in addressing the environmental issues in a holistic manner. Discussions in the previous section suggest that in South Asia there are only two such regional bodies—SAARC and SACEP; and both are mired with daunting challenges. While the progress of SAARC is constrained by political problems, SACEP suffers from other constraints, such as lack of finance, lacking in programme selection, implementation capabilities, etc.. Unless the problems of at least either one of the two regional bodies are addressed, the region will not be able

to balance between extensiveness and intensiveness in its approach towards addressing the environmental challenges.

4.2.3 Lack of unity and commitment

As discussed above, addressing environmental problems in a holistic manner requires comprehensive region-wide organisations. No doubt, the SAARC could have been a good candidate for this purpose but unfortunately, since its inception, the organisation has been stuck with a number of political challenges.

The environmental cooperation initiatives of SAARC suffer in the same way as its previous initiatives. It is therefore not surprising that it took twenty years for the SAARC to approve the “SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment”. Due to this lack of unity and commitment among the member states for stronger regional cooperation, SAARC has remained “a mere meeting and discussion club”.³⁰ South Asian nations are yet to realize that “their ultimate self-interest is inevitably merged in the inescapable web of interdependence”³¹ and this is more so in the case of environment. SAARC has failed to find meaningful regional cooperation on environment issues in the absence of such understanding.

4.2.4 Flaws in selection of programmes

Selection of appropriate programmes is essential for successful intervention by regional environmental bodies. In South Asia, problems remain in this aspect too. SACEP can again be mentioned as an example. As mentioned earlier, one major problem of SACEP is that it focuses on too many issues at one time for which it is not capable in terms of resources. For example, in its Strategy and Program I, the organisation chose 14 subject areas³² to work on. It is noticeable that the fields of action vary widely which has made the implementation of effective programmes a daunting task. Other problems of SACEP include lack of technical facilities for measurement and monitoring and lack in human resources.

³⁰ Habib Zafarullah and Ahmed Shafiqul Huque, “Climate change, regulatory policies and regional cooperation in South Asia,” *Public Administration and Policy* 21 no. 1 (2018): 22-35; Ashok Swain, “Environmental Cooperation in South Asia,” in *Environmental Peacemaking*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 61-85.

³¹ Margaret R. Biswas, “Environment and Development in South Asia,” *Contemporary South Asia* 1, No. 2 (1992): 181-191.

³² The 14 subject areas of SACEP include – (i) Environmental Impact Assessment & cost/benefit analysis; (ii) Environmental Quality Standards; (iii) Technology for development of renewable and reusable resources; (iv) Environmental legislation; (v) Conservation of montane ecosystem and watersheds; (vi) Social forestry; (vii) Conservation of coral, mangroves, deltas. coastal areas; (viii) Island ecosystem; (ix) Tourism and environment; (x) Desertification; (xi) Regional Seas Programme; (xii) Energy and environment; (xiii) Education and training; and (xiv) Training in wildlife management.

4.2.5 *Financial problems*

For regional environmental bodies and initiatives, one common problem is lack of finance. The case of SACEP can be mentioned in this regard. Two major sources of its finance are contributions by governments of member states and funds supplied by donor organisations like UNDP, UNEP, ADB, World Bank etc. As there are often shortfalls in the first source of finance, the organisation has to rely heavily on donor organisations which in turn limits its opportunities in selecting and implementing programs.³³

5. **Challenges of Environment Cooperation in South Asia**

Any understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing environmental cooperation in South Asia will be incomplete without the understanding of the political challenges that are involved in the regional cooperation in this region.

5.1 *SAARC and Its Challenges*

As discussed above, successful regional cooperation in environment demands the presence of a regional structure for that purpose. In the context of South Asia, SAARC could have been the most suitable organisation for providing such structure. Though, recently, South Asian states are trying to significantly restructure their policies and strategies with regard to enhancing cooperation through SAARC,³⁴ huge challenges still remain.

From the very beginning, SAARC has been plagued by some major hurdles in the way of cooperation arising from mistrust, mutual security perceptions and hostility.³⁵ To be more precise, power politics among two member states is a major obstacle which is holding back the organisation to achieve its desired benefits. The lack of trust among the members specifically India and Pakistan have been a stumbling block for the organisation to move forward. On several occasions implementation of decisions was also stalled due to this trust deficit. SAFTA can be cited as an example of it. Apart from the India-Pakistan rivalry, the dominant position of India as bigger state is also a concern for the South Asian region. The

³³ Kazu Kato and Wakana Takahashi, "An Overview of Regional/Subregional Environmental Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific," accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/discussionpaper/en/923/overview_asia_pacific.pdf

³⁴ Don McLain Gill, "Challenges to Regional Cooperation in South Asia: An Overview," *Journal of International Affairs* 3, (2020): 42-51, <https://doi.org/10.3126/joia.v3i1.29081>

³⁵ Irum Shaheen, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Its Role, Hurdles and Prospects," *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 15, Issue 6 (Sep. - Oct. 2013): 01-09.

overbearing presence of a neighbour with aspirations for global leadership has also been a source of apprehensions for India's neighbours.³⁶

The establishment of SAARC was marked by the presence of a wide range of political problems among the member countries. India agreed to join SAARC due to the interest expressed by the neighbouring countries.³⁷ Pakistan's failure to find space in West Asia and Sri Lanka's failed attempt to secure membership in ASEAN left them with no option but to form a new organisation in the South Asian region. The internal conflict instigated Sri Lanka to join SAARC for getting support. Pakistan joined for strengthening its ties with other South Asian countries to counter India's influence in the South Asian region, at the same time, Nepal joined the organisation with the hope of having opportunities to voice its important concerns mainly related with India.³⁸ As a result, there is a trust deficit from the very beginning of the organisation which still continues and obstructs any fruitful cooperation. For these reasons, the organisation adopted the approach to cooperate on non-controversial areas rather than contentious issues. The clause in the SAARC Charter "no bilateral contentious issues in SAARC agenda" indicates the weakness of the inter-state relationship in having equal participation in policy making for the people of this region.

It is thought that the Charter of SAARC ignores the discussion of political and other main issues which in fact help to perpetuate the mistrust among member countries.³⁹ SAARC was established after a prolonged discussion among the leaders of the South Asian countries who decided to avoid bilateral issues in the agenda of the organi. But unfortunately, this provision limited the opportunity for solving these problems which ultimately limited the opportunity for bilateral or multilateral cooperation.⁴⁰ The institutional drawbacks of SAARC posed enormous challenges in regional cooperation in all sectors including environment.

5.2 Geopolitical Challenges to Cooperation

The challenges of cooperation described above are not unique to the SAARC only. Rather, any cooperation in this region suffers from the political challenges similar to those of the SAARC. This is particularly true about the trust deficit among

³⁶ Madhavi Bhasin, "India's Role in South Asia: Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership?," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 3, no.4 (2008): 72-88.

³⁷ Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The search for the ideal platform for regional cooperation," *ORF Issue Brief* 226 (January 2018).

³⁸ Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Stuti Bhatnagar, "Interstate Conflicts and Regionalism in South Asia: Prospects and Challenges," *PERCEPTIONS* (Spring-Summer 2008).

³⁹ Muhammad Muzaffar, Iqra Jathol and Zahid Yaseen, "SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures and Compulsion for Cooperation," *Global Political Review* II, no. 1 (2017): 36-45.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Muzaffar, Iqra Jathol and Zahid Yaseen, "SAARC: An Evaluation of its Achievements, Failures and Compulsion for Cooperation

the countries of the region which acts as a great barrier to any regional cooperation in any sector including environment.

One major source of mistrust among the South Asian countries lies in the geopolitical imbalances among the member countries, more precisely between India vis-à-vis all other member countries. "India is not only the region's largest and strongest economy, but it also constitutes the core of the region".⁴¹ The size and power of India creates concerns among its neighbours about India's dominance in the region and possibility of interference in their internal affairs.

The geopolitical imbalance between India vis-à-vis its neighbours is reinforced by the central position of India in the South Asian region. Though this could have provided a good base for regional cooperation; but for South Asia it has turned into a great obstacle. Due to India's unique position in the region, regional or sub-regional cooperation in this region cannot take place without the involvement of the country. It is alleged that India has always preferred bilateralism over multilateralism which has prevented its South Asian neighbours from forging regional or sub-regional cooperation.⁴² This was particularly the case with energy and water cooperation in South Asia. Geopolitical issues are thus holding back the cooperation initiatives in the South Asian region in all sectors including environment.

5.3 Limitations of Track II initiatives

Some of the limitations highlighted in section 4 regarding regional environmental cooperation is more applicable to Track II initiatives. These include financial constraint and lack of concrete actions. About two decades ago, Ashok Swain observed that though in South Asia, there has been considerable growth in the number of NGOs working on environment issues, a vast majority of them are small in size, are not capable of influencing national policies and hence devote themselves in domestic environmental issues. According to him, another major limitation of Track II initiatives is that they had largely failed to dispel the mistrust among the South Asian countries.⁴³ But the developments in the last two decades, as discussed in preceding sections, show that particularly in environment sector Track II

⁴¹ K. Raman Pillai, "Tensions Within Regional Organisations: - A Study Of SAARC," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (Jan. - March 1989).

⁴² Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Matt McDonald, "Regional cooperation on energy in South Asia: Unraveling the political challenges in implementing transnational pipelines and electricity grids," *Energy Policy* 98, 2016; Dwarika N. Dhungel, "Three Decades of SAARC: Some Observations with specific reference to Energy Sector," *FPRC Journal* 4 (2014).

⁴³ Ashok Swain, "Environmental Cooperation in South Asia," in *Environmental Peacemaking*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 61-85.

initiatives are overcoming these limitations and are playing an important role in initiating and enhancing cooperation among Track I actors.

In summary, the countries of South Asia are exposed to a number of formidable political and geopolitical challenges. These challenges on one hand, explain the slow progress in environmental cooperation in South Asia. On the other hand, it re-emphasises the importance of Track II initiative in advancing environmental cooperation in this region. It seems that in a region, mired by political tension and trust deficit, cooperation between Track I and Track II might be the possible pathway to enhance environmental cooperation.

6. Conclusion

Although the South Asian countries are exposed to a variety of environmental concerns, cooperation on environmental concerns is not sufficient. To address the challenges of regional environmental cooperation in South Asia and strengthen it, an evaluation of the existing cooperation is of great importance. It is in this background that the present paper aims to evaluate the existing regional environmental cooperation in South Asia with a view to identifying its strengths, weaknesses and challenges. The paper argues that in the past decades increasing recognition of the importance of environmental concern can be noticed which has been reflected in increased attempts for regional cooperation in this regard, whether successful or not. It is found that there is a presence of a broad spectrum of regional environmental cooperation initiatives in South Asia which, if properly utilized, can become strength for regional environmental cooperation in the region. It is also found that though in South Asia, Track II processes are yet to play significant roles in influencing regional politics; with respect to environmental cooperation, it is emerging as a significant driver which has been reflected in their increasing role as agents or initiator of cooperation. Lack of concrete action, political and financial challenges and lack in the selection of appropriate programmes have been identified as the major challenges for regional environmental cooperation in South Asia.

For forging environmental cooperation in the South Asian region, the following can be suggested:

- The concept of new regionalism emphasizes on the role of civil society in promoting regional cooperation. Civil society organisations are continuously giving efforts to improve relations among the countries of the region. Civil society organisation can play an important role in stimulating regional environmental cooperation in the South Asian region.
- It is necessary to redesign the policies of countries which would ensure a multilateral approach rather than a bilateral one while establishing environmental cooperation. A common synchronized framework for cooperation would be helpful for implementing the policies.

- Although local problems can be solved at the local level, the problems that have transboundary effects that require a different approach. South Asian countries need to be more willing to share their best practices with neighbouring countries to solve similar transboundary crises. For this, it is necessary to harmonize the policies and strategies.
- As climate change and environmental degradation are the major concerns, governments of the region need to take initiative and harmonize their policies with the regional ones. Environmental cooperation initiatives are mostly weakened by the mistrust among the states of the region. For the shared well-being of the region, it is imperative to reduce mistrust among the countries of the region so that they can act together in tackling disasters and climate change-induced hazards through concerted initiatives, sound strategies and effective implementation procedures.