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FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION: PROSPECTS FOR A CONFEDERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

South Asia, characterized by its historical rivalries and economic disparities, remains one of the least integrated regions globally. This research paper explores the potential for transitioning from conflict to collaboration through the formation of a confederation in South Asia. By addressing the context of regional dynamics, it emphasizes the growing importance of integration in an interconnected world. The concept of a confederation is unpacked alongside its potential role in mitigating historical tensions and fostering regional cooperation. The paper examines the region's political and economic history, assessing existing frameworks like SAARC, which have struggled to meet their objectives due to geopolitical rivalries and structural weaknesses. Through the lens of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, the research investigates the feasibility of a South Asian Confederation, while acknowledging the unique challenges posed by South Asia's context. Key components of a proposed confederation are outlined, covering political structures, economic integration, security cooperation, and cultural collaboration. The study also delves into the significant hurdles—historical animosities, power asymmetry, economic disparities, and external influences—that hinder progress toward a unified framework. Despite these obstacles, the research highlights the immense opportunities a confederation could offer, such as accelerated economic growth, improved security, and a unified voice on global issues. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations aimed at building trust, strengthening existing institutions, and designing a governance model conducive to regional harmony. While achieving a South Asian Confederation is fraught with challenges, this research underscores the transformative potential of fostering unity in diversity, paving the way for a collaborative and prosperous future.

Key Words: South Asia, confederation, integration, Geopolitics, Economic Disparities.

1. Introduction

In the modern world often termed as global village, regional integration is more essential than desired (O. V. Butorina & Yu. A. Borko, 2022). Integrations can not only serve humanity in a better way through uplifting the economic standards of public

residing in those countries but it can unlock opportunities for others as well. Confederation, defined as a voluntary union of sovereign states that retain their independence while collaborating on shared objective among nations, can help in regional stability, climate change initiatives and poverty elevation (Glencross, 2007). European Union and ASEAN are a few examples where nations have been benefited collectively.

South Asia including Afghanistan is home to a quarter of world population. The area is rich with natural resources and occupies a geo strategic location on the globe (Chuanlu, 2021). It shares borders with major powers like Russia and China along with occupying major sea routes from Strait of Malaka to Strait of Hurmaz. South Asia is a diverse region with country like India who is becoming an economic giant to Bhutan and Maldives, hides a treasure of development and progress for the public. A confederation of South Asia has the capability of influencing geo-economics as well as geo strategy at global level (Gill, 2020). Although SAARC serves as a regional organisation but the engagements between the countries are more bilateral than been addressed collectively at regional level.

Although, the concept of a confederation for South Asia seems unlikely due concerns of nations like Trust issues, lack of communication (CMBs) and geopolitical rivalries between neighbours as well as global powers. However, by concentrating on aspects like trade, security, and cultural exchange, a path for South Asian Confederation can paved. Thus transforming the region from conflict to cooperation, leveraging the region's collective strengths to overcome shared challenges. This research shall imagine a Unified South Asia called Confederation of South Asia (CSA), its possible structure, challenges, and benefits.

2. Historical Context of Regional Cooperation in South Asia: An Analysis of Regional Cooperation and Limitations

South Asia has been categorised by a place of tussle between India, Pakistan and China. Its warm water and geo strategic position increases its position in the eyes of great powers. Although, the region has seen a golden period in terms of unity, cultural exchange, and harmony in Maurya and Mughal empires but it was never free from tussles and conflicts (Manuel, 2016). Contentions between local states and sometime hires has disturbed the peace and unity of the region. This has kept the region mostly disintegrated and welcomed foreigners to attack and subdue the public.

The British colonial era profoundly reshaped South Asia's political and economic landscape. By consolidating disparate territories under the British Raj, colonial rulers introduced modern administrative systems and infrastructure (Aryal & Pulamib, 2024). However, this period also fragmented the region's unity. The colonial policy of "divide and rule" exacerbated communal tensions, sowing discord among diverse religious and ethnic groups (Tharoor, 2017). Economically, South Asia's integration into the global capitalist system under British rule was exploitative. Local industries, such as textiles, were dismantled to serve British economic interests, and the region was relegated to a raw material supplier. This exploitation entrenched economic disparities, which persisted post-independence.

The partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan was a watershed moment, leaving a lasting legacy of hostility. The partition led to mass migrations, communal violence, and unresolved territorial disputes, most notably over Kashmir (Aryal & Pulamib, 2024). These tensions continue to define South Asia's geopolitics, with India and Pakistan's rivalry being the central fault line. Post-independence, South Asian nations pursued varied economic and political paths. While India embarked on a strategy of state-led industrialization, other nations like Nepal and Bhutan relied heavily on agriculture and external aid. These differing trajectories created disparities in development levels and economic influence, further complicating regional dynamics.

3. Regional Frameworks and Their Limitations

South Asia's historical and structural complexities have shaped its fragmented approach to regional cooperation but its implementation was hindered by mistrust and differing national priorities. SAARC, established in 1985, was envisioned as a platform to promote economic and social development in South Asia (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2008). With eight member states—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—SAARC aimed to foster cooperation across diverse sectors, including trade, health, and education. Despite its ambitious goals, SAARC has achieved limited success. One major hindrance is the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan, which has frequently stalled progress. For instance, summits have been postponed or cancelled due to bilateral tensions, preventing the implementation of key initiatives. Additionally, SAARC lacks robust enforcement mechanisms.

Agreements, such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), have been undermined by non-tariff barriers and political mistrust (Kathuria & Rizwan, 2019). Established in 2004, was a landmark agreement aimed at reducing tariffs and boosting intra-regional trade. However, SAFTA's impact has been minimal, with intra-regional trade accounting for only about 5% of South Asia's total trade—one of the lowest among regional blocs globally (Ur-Rashid & Khan, 2024). The organization's consensus-based decision-making process also makes it difficult to address contentious issues effectively.

Previous attempts at fostering collaboration reveal valuable lessons but also emphasize the significant barriers to progress. Understanding this historical context is essential for envisioning a future model of cooperation, such as a South Asian Confederation. By addressing the root causes of mistrust, power imbalances, and external interference, South Asia can move toward a framework that transforms its potential into reality.

4. Challenges to a South Asian Confederation

A South Asian Confederation, while offering numerous opportunities for regional cooperation and development, would face significant challenges due to historical, political, economic, and social factors. Below is a sub outline that details these challenges, including unresolved conflicts, power asymmetry, economic disparities, external influences, and mistrust among member states.

- 4.1. **Historical Tensions and Unresolved Conflicts.** South Asia's complex history, marked by colonial legacies, territorial disputes, and ethnic rivalries, presents a major challenge to the creation of a cohesive confederation.
- 4.2. **Inherited Conflict.** The long-standing territorial conflict over Kashmir remains a critical issue, with both India and Pakistan asserting claims over the region (Ahanger, 2019). Any regional agreement must account for this sensitive matter, which could impede cooperation between the two largest member states. Similarly, the border disputes persists between almost all of the members of SAARC. The arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers in South Asia have contributed to enduring conflicts, particularly between India and its neighbours (Aryal & Pulamib, 2024). The legacy of colonialism often feeds into nationalistic sentiments, which can limit the willingness to pursue regional integration. The nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan further complicates the potential for collaboration, as both countries remain locked in a tense standoff.
- 4.3. **Cross-Border Terrorism:** The accusation of Pakistan supporting cross-border terrorism has led to strained relations with India. Similarly Pakistan is accusing Afghanistan for supporting terrorism on its soil (Bashir, 2023). Sri Lanka and Bangladesh had tense relations with India and accused it for interference and terrorism in their countries (Khetran, 2017). Efforts to address security concerns would be complicated by these accusations and the lack of trust.
- 4.4. **National Identity:** The strong national identities within each state, driven by history, culture, and politics, could conflict with the idea of a regional identity (Qaiser, 2015). This tension between national pride and regional cooperation could hinder the development of a South Asian Confederation. Many States may not easily agree to surrender their sovereignty especially in front of India who by virtue of its size and economy may be seen as a dominant power even if it does not dominates it. In case a democratic model is followed in confederation, its implementation in Islamic regime in Afghanistan may be challenging.
- 4.5. **Asymmetry of Power among Member States.** South Asia is home to significant disparities in the power, size, and influence of its member states, which presents a major obstacle to the formation of a balanced and fair confederation. India, as the largest and most powerful country in South Asia, dominates the region economically and militarily (Manuel, 2016). While this might provide stability, it could also create imbalances in decision-making and policymaking within the confederation. Smaller nations like Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives may feel marginalized by India's overwhelming influence, leading to a lack of trust and reluctance to fully participate in the confederation. India's dominance could be seen by its neighbours as a form of regional hegemony, which could deter cooperation and deepen regional mistrust.

- 4.6. **Economic Disparities.** South Asia's economic landscape is marked by significant inequalities, which would pose challenges for creating an economically integrated confederation. India with a GDP of 3,567,552 Million USD, single handily surpasses all other SAARC members who collectively has a GDP of 941,053 Million USD (Niaz, 2022). While India and Bangladesh have experienced notable economic growth, countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan still face challenges in terms of infrastructure, education, and industrialization. These disparities could lead to unequal benefits from regional cooperation. Similarly different economic priorities among member states, such as India's focus on technology and services versus Sri Lanka's emphasis on agriculture and tourism, could hinder the creation of a unified economic agenda. Trade within South Asia is currently limited due to tariffs, logistical challenges, and protectionist policies (Qaiser S. , 2023). Despite efforts to reduce barriers, imbalances in trade could exacerbate economic tensions and create inequalities among member states. Wealthier nations might not be incentivized to invest in the development of their poorer neighbours, limiting the potential for equitable economic growth within the confederation.
- 4.7. **Poverty and Social Inequality.** A major challenge will be ensuring that the benefits of regional integration are distributed equitably across all member states. In countries with high levels of poverty, there may be concerns about how economic policies will impact the most vulnerable populations. The disparities in income, education, and healthcare access across South Asia could make it difficult to create cohesive economic policies that benefit all countries equally (The World Bank, 2015).
- 4.8. **External Influences from Global Powers.** South Asia's geopolitical position and its relations with global powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union could influence the success of a South Asian Confederation. China's growing influence in Pakistan through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could create tensions with India, which views China as a strategic competitor (Hussain, Ramzan, & Singh, 2024). This external involvement could complicate the formation of a regional bloc. China's economic ties with South Asian nations, particularly through infrastructure projects and trade agreements, may dilute the desire for a more unified South Asian economic bloc, as countries may prefer Chinese investment over regional cooperation. United States' strong strategic partnership with India may lead to a focus on bilateral relations, rather than regional cooperation, potentially undermining a South Asian Confederation (Khan, 2014). The US, Russia, and other powers may see the establishment of a South Asian Confederation as a counterbalance to their influence in the region, potentially involving themselves in the process and creating further political divisions.

- 4.9. **Mistrust and Lack of Political Will.** A lack of trust between regional players is one of the most significant challenges to the formation of a South Asian Confederation. The legacy of conflict between India Pakistan, Pakistan Afghanistan, India Bangladesh, India Sri Lanka, breeds deep mistrust, making collaboration difficult. The persistent tensions between these countries, and the larger regional rivalries, hinder any progress toward a unified political system (Gill, 2020). Resistance from political elites, who often see regional cooperation as a threat to their vote bank, narrative or influence, could also undermine efforts to build a confederation.
- 4.10. **Political and internal Instability.** In some South Asian countries, political instability and weak governance structures may make it difficult to build the trust necessary for regional cooperation (Niaz, 2022). The frequent turnover of governments and changes in leadership complicates the establishment of consistent and reliable regional policies. The internal conflicts in countries could spill over into the regional discourse, preventing effective collaboration in a confederation.

These challenges represent significant obstacles to the creation of a South Asian Confederation. Addressing them requires careful diplomacy, trust-building, and a commitment to shared regional goals, recognizing the complexity and diversity of the South Asian region.

5. Opportunities and Benefits of a South Asian Confederation

While there are significant challenges to forming a South Asian Confederation, there are also considerable opportunities and potential benefits that could arise from such regional cooperation. These benefits span across economic, security, geopolitical, and social dimensions, contributing to regional stability and global significance.

5.1. Economic Growth and Development

5.1.1. **Increased Intra-Regional Trade:** The elimination of trade barriers among South Asian nations, including tariffs, trade restrictions, and non-tariff barriers, would lead to a seamless flow of goods and services across borders (Kaul, 2017). This could increase economic activity, creating new opportunities for businesses and boosting government revenues. A unified economic zone would act as a magnet for investors, particularly in smaller or developing economies that struggle to attract substantial capital on their own. Moreover, integrating regional supply chains would allow countries to focus on industries where they have a competitive advantage, reducing production costs and enhancing overall efficiency (Imam, 2023). For example, a garment produced in Bangladesh could incorporate textiles from India and technology from Sri Lanka, creating value-added products that benefit all.

5.1.2. **Economic Diversification and Specialization:** Each South Asian country brings unique strengths to the table. India excels in technology and services, Sri Lanka thrives in agriculture and

tourism, Bangladesh is a global leader in textiles, and Pakistan has strong agricultural and manufacturing sectors (Miah, Erdei-Gally, Dancs, & Fekete-Farkas, 2024). A confederation would encourage these nations to specialize in their respective areas of expertise, while promoting cross-border collaboration to maximize productivity. Furthermore, pooling resources through a unified strategy could support large-scale infrastructure projects like interconnected highways, regional energy grids, and enhanced digital connectivity, laying the foundation for long-term economic growth. This collaboration could uplift underdeveloped areas, creating jobs and reducing regional disparities.

5.1.3. **Investment and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI):** The combined market size of South Asia, with its youthful population and growing consumer base, would be highly attractive to foreign investors. Stable political conditions and improved institutional frameworks under a confederation would further enhance the region's appeal (ACAR, 2019). Establishing regional investment funds could facilitate the development of large infrastructure, research, and development projects, ensuring that the economic benefits of foreign capital are shared equitably. For example, a jointly financed tech park could generate innovation while benefiting multiple countries simultaneously.

5.2. **Improved Security and Reduced Conflicts**

5.2.1. **Counterterrorism Collaboration:** South Asia faces shared security challenges, including cross-border terrorism, organized crime, and the presence of extremist groups (Khan A. H., 2023). A confederation would enable countries to share intelligence more effectively, pooling resources and expertise to combat these threats. Joint military exercises and anti-terrorism initiatives would strengthen the region's capacity to respond to threats that often spill over borders, fostering trust and collaboration among member states. For example, coordinated action against terrorist networks operating across multiple nations could neutralize threats more comprehensively than isolated efforts.

5.2.2. **Border Management and Security:** With shared borders, South Asian nations face frequent disputes over territory and cross-border issues such as smuggling, trafficking, and unauthorized migration (Bhagat, 2022). A confederation would enable the adoption of standardized border management policies, reducing friction and ensuring smooth coordination among border forces. This could lead to improved security while respecting human rights and facilitating legal trade and travel. Additionally, a centralized dispute resolution framework would provide a

peaceful platform for resolving border conflicts, minimizing the risk of escalation into violence.

5.2.3. **Preventing Regional Rivalries:** Long-standing rivalries, such as those between India and Pakistan, have historically hindered regional cooperation (Liaqat & Abbasi, 2023). Economic collaboration under a confederation could build trust and reduce hostility by creating interdependencies among nations. Diplomatic channels would be strengthened, enabling peaceful dialogue to resolve disputes. Moreover, arms control agreements could reduce military expenditures, redirecting funds toward developmental priorities and enhancing collective security in the region.

5.3. **Enhanced Global Influence**

5.3.1. **Stronger Voice in International Affairs:** A unified South Asia would have greater leverage in international organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and climate change forums (Pal, 2021). By presenting a single, cohesive stance, the region could shape global policies more effectively, advocating for issues that impact its development. For instance, a unified voice could demand fairer trade practices, more equitable climate funding, or greater representation in global decision-making bodies.

5.3.2. **Geopolitical Significance:** South Asia's integration would elevate its importance on the global stage, enabling it to act as a counterbalance to major powers like China, the United States, and Russia (Lehmkuhl, 2024). This strategic position would attract economic partnerships and diplomatic engagement from influential blocs such as the EU and ASEAN. By fostering regional stability and unity, South Asia could transform into a pivotal player in global power dynamics, influencing policies and securing beneficial alliances.

5.3.3. **Collaboration with Multilateral Institutions:** Pooling resources and expertise would enable South Asia to lead global initiatives in areas like climate change, scientific research, and technological innovation (Uprety, 2024). For example, joint research programs could advance renewable energy technologies or develop solutions for climate resilience, positioning the region as a global leader in sustainability. Such collaborations would not only benefit the region but also enhance its international reputation and attract further investment.

5.4. **Addressing Shared Challenges like Climate Change and Poverty**

5.4.1. **Climate Change:** South Asia is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world, facing rising sea levels, extreme weather, and

agricultural disruptions (Sato, 2024). A confederation would allow member states to develop unified policies for climate adaptation and mitigation, leveraging shared resources and expertise. Joint disaster management systems would enable faster responses to natural calamities, reducing human and economic losses. Furthermore, investments in green technologies and renewable energy projects would create a pathway toward a sustainable, low-carbon future, benefiting both the region and the planet (Gul Wani, Loganathan, & Hasan Esmail, 2024).

5.4.2. **Poverty Alleviation:** The region struggles with widespread poverty, particularly in rural areas. A confederation could establish shared social programs to improve education, healthcare, and infrastructure, directly addressing the needs of vulnerable populations (Woodhill, Kishore, Njuki, Jones, & Hasnain, 2022). By pooling funds into a regional development initiative, member states could implement targeted projects to uplift underdeveloped areas, reduce economic inequality, and foster long-term human development.

5.4.3. **Addressing Public Health Challenges:** Health challenges like infectious diseases, poor healthcare access, and inadequate infrastructure are common across South Asia (Sato, 2024). A unified approach to public health would facilitate resource-sharing for disease surveillance, vaccination campaigns, and medical research. Regional healthcare networks could ensure equitable and affordable access to medical services, significantly improving public health outcomes and enhancing overall quality of life.

The establishment of a South Asian Confederation holds immense potential to transform the region. By fostering economic growth, enhancing security, increasing global influence, and addressing shared challenges, member states could create a more prosperous, stable, and unified South Asia. Overcoming historical divisions and building collaborative frameworks would enable the region to unlock its full potential, improving the lives of its people while contributing significantly to global progress.

6. Recommendations for a South Asian Confederation

Establishing a South Asian Confederation (SAC) requires addressing the multifaceted challenges that have historically hindered regional integration. A structured and phased approach, inspired by the European Union model, can help overcome these obstacles while fostering unity among member states. Below is a comprehensive plan addressing each challenge through practical and actionable recommendations?

6.1. **To address historical tensions and unresolved conflicts,** the SAC should prioritize peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms and confidence-building measures (CBMs). A South Asian Dispute Tribunal staffed by

neutral legal experts and technocrats can arbitrate territorial and political disputes like Kashmir and maritime boundaries. Joint peace dialogues and cultural exchange programs can foster trust and bridge the historical divides between nations. Furthermore, a phased military de-escalation in contested regions under international oversight, coupled with a regional non-aggression pact, would help ensure that conflicts do not disrupt the confederation's goals.

- 6.2. **The asymmetry of power among member states, particularly India's dominance**, can be mitigated by ensuring equal representation in SAC's Parliament, regardless of population size. Each member state should have the same number of elected representatives, with additional reserved seats for technocrats to address expertise gaps. A rotational presidency within SAC's Executive Council and a power-balancing mechanism, such as veto rights for smaller states on sovereignty-related matters, would reassure less influential members like Bhutan and Maldives that their voices carry equal weight. These steps, alongside a non-hegemony charter committing larger nations to non-dominance principles, will create a more balanced and equitable platform.
- 6.3. **Economic disparities across the region** pose another significant challenge. A Regional Economic Development Fund (REDF) should be established, with larger economies like India and Bangladesh contributing proportionally more to support infrastructure, healthcare, and education in less-developed nations such as Afghanistan and Nepal. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) can be developed in cross-border areas to boost trade and industrialization in underprivileged regions. Harmonized tariffs under a Customs Union will further promote intra-regional trade, while capacity-building programs, including technology transfers and skill development initiatives, can reduce economic inequalities over time.
- 6.4. **Poverty and social inequality must be addressed** to ensure the benefits of regional integration reach vulnerable populations. SAC could introduce a Universal Basic Services Program that guarantees free primary healthcare, education, and access to clean drinking water for all. A Social Equity Fund should target poverty alleviation through microfinance initiatives, focusing on marginalized communities. Moreover, job creation through large-scale regional projects such as cross-border railways and renewable energy grids will uplift economically weaker sections of society.
- 6.5. **The influence of external global powers**, such as the United States, China, and Russia, should be balanced through a unified strategic autonomy policy. SAC member states must adopt a South Asian Non-Aligned Strategy to reduce dependency on external powers. Regional infrastructure projects, like energy grids and transport corridors, should be prioritized over foreign-led initiatives to foster self-reliance. A Regional Oversight Committee can evaluate all foreign-funded projects to ensure

alignment with SAC's goals. Representing SAC as a single bloc in global forums such as the WTO and G20 will further amplify its bargaining power while reducing external interference.

- 6.6. **To build trust and political will**, the SAC should launch a Trust-Building Forum where member states can address grievances and foster mutual understanding. Public diplomacy campaigns should promote a shared South Asian identity, highlighting common cultural and historical ties. Legally binding agreements on non-aggression and mutual support will reinforce trust among members. Establishing independent monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with SAC agreements will further enhance transparency and accountability.
- 6.7. **Political instability within some member states**, particularly Afghanistan and Nepal, can be mitigated by strengthening governance structures through capacity-building initiatives. Technical support and training should be provided to countries with weaker institutions. A Peace and Stability Fund could offer financial aid to stabilize politically volatile nations. The integration process should begin with economic and cultural cooperation, deferring political unification until governance improves in these countries. Afghanistan, given its unique circumstances, could initially be granted observer status, transitioning to full membership once democratic benchmarks are met.

The proposed recommendations, if implemented, can address the challenges of forming a South Asian Confederation. By emphasizing equitable governance, economic inclusivity, trust-building, and phased integration, SAC can evolve into a robust political and economic bloc, promoting peace, prosperity, and regional solidarity.

7. Implementation Plan for a Confederation of South Asian (CSA)

The creation of a Confederation of South Asian (CSA) requires a phased and systematic approach to address historical mistrust, economic disparities, and institutional challenges. Building on the SAARC platform, this plan outlines actionable steps across four phases to foster trust, integrate economies, and strengthen political and security cooperation.

- 7.1. **Phase 1- Foundation and Trust-Building (Years 1-5)**: To lay the groundwork for SAC, member states should leverage the SAARC platform to initiate regular high-level dialogues focused on regional integration. These discussions must emphasize shared goals, such as economic prosperity, stability, and global competitiveness. Establishing a **Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC)** is critical at this stage. Comprising equal representation from all member states and supported by neutral legal and technical experts, the DRC would mediate long-standing conflicts like Kashmir, border disputes, and resource-sharing disagreements. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) are essential to overcoming historical mistrust. Initiatives like cultural exchange programs, academic

collaborations, and joint sporting events can foster a sense of shared identity among member states. Additionally, transforming the SAARC Secretariat into a transitional SAC Secretariat, located in a neutral state such as Nepal or Bhutan, would enhance coordination and neutrality. Member states must also commit to a regional **Non-Aggression Pact**, pledging to resolve conflicts peacefully and avoid interference in each other's domestic affairs.

- 7.2. **Phase 2- Economic and Institutional Integration (Years 6-10):** This phase focuses on creating economic interdependence and strengthening institutional frameworks. A **South Asian Economic Council (SAEC)** should be formed to reduce trade barriers, harmonize tariffs, and promote intra-regional trade. Introducing a **South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA)** would pave the way for economic integration. To address regional inequalities, a **Regional Economic Development Fund (REDF)** should be established, with larger economies like India and Bangladesh contributing proportionally more to fund development projects in less-advantaged countries. Infrastructure projects, such as cross-border railways and energy grids, can promote connectivity and economic growth. **Special Economic Zones (SEZs)** should be developed in strategic cross-border areas, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan and India-Nepal corridors, to enhance trade and industrial collaboration. Alongside economic initiatives, institutional frameworks such as a **Regional Oversight Committee** can ensure fair implementation of agreements and monitor progress. Drafting the SAC Charter during this phase will lay the legal and structural foundations for the confederation.
- 7.3. **Phase 3- Political and Security Cooperation (Years 11-15):** As trust and economic ties deepen, the focus should shift to political and security integration. Establishing a **bicameral SAC Parliament** with equal representation from all member states ensures equitable governance. Reserved seats for technocrats from various fields, including defence, climate change, and economics, will strengthen decision-making. To address security challenges, a **Regional Defence Council (RDC)** should be formed, prioritizing joint counterterrorism operations, disaster response mechanisms, and cross-border security cooperation. Political integration also requires alignment of foreign policies in global forums. A **Regional Diplomatic Protocol** would ensure SAC speaks with one voice at platforms like the UN, WTO, and COP summits. To promote regional mobility, a unified identification framework can be piloted, easing visa-free travel for SAC citizens. These measures would solidify political and security cooperation, laying the groundwork for deeper unification.
- 7.4. **Phase 4- Full Confederation and Policy Integration (Years 16-20):** The final phase focuses on completing the confederation's structure and policies. Member states must ratify the **SAC Charter**, defining the

confederation's governance, economic, and security frameworks. The SAC Parliament should be fully empowered to oversee foreign policy, defence, and economic matters, with direct elections ensuring democratic representation. Economic integration can be advanced by introducing a regional currency for trade, gradually transitioning to a common currency. Climate change and sustainability initiatives, under a **South Asia Green Pact**, should be implemented to ensure environmental resilience. The **Regional Defence Council** must become fully operational, focusing on collective security and emerging threats like cybercrime. Promoting a shared South Asian identity through educational curricula, media campaigns, and tourism initiatives will foster unity. By the end of this phase, SAC would emerge as a cohesive and influential regional bloc.

The phased implementation plan addresses key challenges, such as historical tensions, economic disparities, and mistrust, while building a robust framework for cooperation. By focusing on trust-building, economic interdependence, and political integration, the SAC can transform South Asia into a unified and prosperous region

8. Conclusion

The concept of a South Asian Confederation (SAC) holds immense potential to transform a region riddled with mistrust, economic disparity, and geopolitical rivalries into a cohesive, prosperous, and stable bloc. Home to nearly a quarter of the world's population, South Asia's strategic geographic location and abundant resources offer an opportunity to establish a globally influential union, capable of addressing shared challenges such as climate change, poverty, and security.

Despite the rich history of regional unity during empires like the Mauryas and Mughals, the region has been marred by conflicts, particularly during the colonial era and the subsequent partition of India and Pakistan. These historical divisions, combined with nationalistic tendencies, unresolved disputes such as Kashmir, and power asymmetry, have hindered the success of frameworks like SAARC. Regional initiatives like SAFTA have failed to unlock the economic potential of South Asia due to mistrust, protectionism, and limited enforcement mechanisms.

However, a phased, pragmatic approach to establishing SAC could overcome these barriers. The first step would involve trust-building and conflict resolution through a neutral Dispute Resolution Committee, confidence-building measures, and a non-aggression pact. Gradual economic integration through free trade agreements, infrastructure development, and shared economic funds would address disparities and foster interdependence. Political and security cooperation, achieved through a bicameral SAC Parliament and joint defence initiatives, would enhance governance and stability. Finally, a fully operational SAC, governed by a unified charter, would serve as a global force for economic, environmental, and political progress.

By learning from successful models like the European Union and ASEAN, SAC can provide a pathway for transforming South Asia from a fragmented region into a harmonious and thriving confederation, ultimately leveraging its collective strengths to address shared challenges and uplift the region's population.

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