

India-SAARC

India is a founding member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that was set up in 1985 as an organization to build a connected and integrated South Asia with the larger aim of promoting the development and progress of all countries in the region.

India continues to support various initiatives in the SAARC framework to achieve closer cooperation in diverse areas.

Out of the eighteen SAARC Summits held so far, India has hosted three, viz. the second (Bengaluru, November 1986), the eighth (New Delhi, May 1995) and the fourteenth (New Delhi, April 2007).

India enjoys excellent bilateral relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. As per our 'Neighbourhood First' policy, India is an active development partner and is engaged in several projects in these countries. Our engagement with these countries is based on a consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented approach, while focussing on delivering benefits like greater connectivity, improved infrastructure, stronger development cooperation in various sectors area, security and broader people-to-people contacts.

India has been steadfast in its commitment of sharing the fruits of technological advances with like-minded countries in its neighbourhood. In this context, India's initiative of extending its National Knowledge Network (NKN) to the countries of South Asia has been extended to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Prime Minister of India inaugurated the extension to Bhutan in August 2019. Extension to other participating SAARC countries is under progress. India launched a South Asian Satellite (SAS) in May 2017 from Sriharikota. Demonstration terminals of SAS have been installed in Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka..

As a yet another major contribution of India to cooperation in the SAARC framework, India is home to South Asian University (SAU). It was established through an Inter-Governmental Agreement at the 14th SAARC Summit (April 2008) to provide world class educational facilities and professional faculty to students and researchers from SAARC countries. It offers Master's and M.Phil/PhD programmes in eight disciplines. Presently, there are over 550 students and around 60 faculty members. The university functions from its temporary premises in Akbar Bhavan, New Delhi. India is committed to bear the entire capital cost towards the construction of its permanent campus, which is in progress over 100 acres of land in Maidangarhi in Delhi. The university is expected to move to its permanent campus in the near future. SAU's operational

budget is on the basis of contribution by all SAARC countries, with India being the largest contributor.

India also hosts the Interim Unit of SAARC Disaster Management Center (IU) at the Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management (GIDM), Gandhinagar. It has been operational since November 2016, serving the needs of all SAARC member states through policy advice, technical support on system development, capacity building services and training for holistic management of disaster risk in the SAARC region.

India is fully aware of challenges in South Asia, with cross-border terrorism being the most serious of those challenges. At the last Informal Meeting of SAARC Foreign Ministers held in New York on the sidelines of UN General Assembly on 26 September 2019, India stressed how the problems that beset SAARC were not just a story of missed opportunities but also of deliberate obstacles, terrorism being one of them and that elimination of terrorism in all its forms is a precondition not only for fruitful cooperation, but also for the very survival of our region itself.

India-SAARC & Covid-19

- At the initiative of the Prime Minister, a Video Conference of SAARC Leaders on combating COVID-19 was held on 15 March 2020. It demonstrated the shared resolve of countries in the SAARC region to fight together the unprecedented challenge of the coronavirus pandemic. India created a COVID-19 Emergency Fund with an initial offer of USD 10 million to meet the costs of immediate actions. India's humanitarian relief in the region includes supply of essential drugs, antibiotics, medical consumables, COVID protection and testing kits, and other laboratory and hospital equipment
- SAARC Disaster Management Centre (Interim Unit) in Gandhinagar, with the assistance of MEA, MoHFW and our Missions, have set up a dedicated website on Covid-19 (<http://www.covid19-sdmc.org/>) for use by SAARC countries. A video conference of health professionals representing all SAARC countries at the level of Director General of Health Services (DGHS) was held in March 2020. A video conference of trade officials of SAARC countries was held in April 2020 to discuss the impact of travel restrictions and the larger COVID-19 situation on intra-regional trade.
- India has developed a 'SAARC COVID19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)' platform for use by all SAARC countries to facilitate exchange of specialized information and tools on COVID-19 among designated health professionals. Under India's e-ITEC network, training of healthcare personnel in our neighbourhood has been conducted with content delivery by super specialty medical institutes like AIIMS and PGI Chandigarh. AIIMS

New Delhi has also separately held a series of 3 video-conferencing sessions in May 2020 on COVID-19 for practising medical professionals in SAARC countries.

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