

— PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE

EDITION 2026

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QUESTIONS

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**South Asia: Regionalism, SAARC & BIMSTEC · 8
questions**

Every question carries a Flow Snapshot — and a handwritten
model answer on the channel.

No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PSIR Optional By Amit Pratap Singh

 **Forum IAS**

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 10 marks

What are the impediments in the development of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 in force since 2006 → intra-regional trade still ~5% against ASEAN's 25% → tariffs were never the real barrier **R2** the region cut the one barrier it could agree on → kept every barrier that mattered → an instrument narrower than the problem

Body flow

NTBs untouched, focus on tariffs alone → trade costs 114% of export value, Brazil cheaper than neighbours → similar agricultural baskets, competitors not partners → India-EU 2026 sharpens the contest for outside markets → political discretion overrides the text: May 2025 prohibition on Pakistani goods, SAARC visa exemption withdrawn, India-Bangladesh port restrictions → **Wignaraja**: secretariats coordinate and monitor, no delegated authority

Counter-view

informal trade across porous frontiers (UNESCAP) → official data understate actual exchange → the constraint is the agreement's remit, not the region's appetite

Conclusion routes

R1 SAFTA failed on what it was never allowed to govern **R2** tariff cuts cannot move the 5% until NTBs, transit and enforcement enter its remit

SAFTA has been in force since 2006, but intra-regional trade stays near 5% of South Asia's total against ASEAN's 25%.

Non-tariff barriers were left untouched while the focus stayed on tariff reduction. Trade costs within the region run to 114% of export value. It makes Brazil a cheaper partner for India than its neighbours. Members produce similar agricultural goods and compete for the same outside markets. The India-EU agreement of January 2026 erodes the duty-free advantage Bangladesh & Pakistan held in Europe.

In May 2025 India prohibited direct and indirect imports of all Pakistani goods and withdrew the SAARC visa exemption.

Through 2025 India & Bangladesh imposed reciprocal port restrictions on each other's exports. Ganeshan Wignaraja argues that the regional secretariats can only coordinate & monitor. They do not hold delegated authority to take corrective measures.

UNESCAP does not find official data to capture the trade but informal border trade across porous frontiers shows the transactions. Therefore, SAFTA's failure lies in what it was never allowed to govern.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Discuss the strategic implications of India's 'Look East Policy' transforming into 'Act East Policy'.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 1991 turn east forced by the Soviet collapse → 2014 renaming changed instruments, not direction → implications cut both ways

R2 Look East sought markets, Act East seeks position → the verb changed when the theatre widened from Southeast Asia to the Indo-Pacific → so the policy is now judged on delivery

Body flow

eastern policy becomes Indo-Pacific policy → Bay of Bengal as shared security space → BIMSTEC past SAARC's paralysis, Pakistan marginalised → Sittwe against Chinese ports → but acting needs ground India does not control → **Raja Mohan** on slow implementation, weak connectivity → Kaladan + trilateral highway stalled, June 2026 → corridors cross an unsettled Northeast

Counter-view

the reorientation itself is real, not rhetoric → what is contested is conversion: trade review open since 2023, and the 2026 regional survey puts distrust above trust in the four maritime states India courts most → reach outrunning delivery

Conclusion routes

R1 frame widened, delivery has yet to catch up **R2** the verb changed before the capacity did — Act East reads India's interests correctly and still awaits the means to serve them

India turned east in 1991 after the Soviet collapse. Act East announced in 2014, changed the instruments rather than the direction i.e. trade gave way to security & connectivity.

India's eastern policy became its Indo-Pacific policy. The Bay of Bengal is a shared security space. BIMSTEC offers a way past SAARC's paralysis while marginalising Pakistan. The Sittwe port counters Chinese port activity in Myanmar.

C. Raja Mohan criticises the slow implementation & weak connectivity of the Kaladan corridor and trilateral highway. In June 2026 India's foreign secretary said both remain stalled by the fighting inside Myanmar. The corridors also cross a Northeast where autonomy & identity questions persist.

The India-ASEAN goods agreement, under review since 2023 is still unfinished in July 2026. The 2026 State of Southeast Asia survey places distrust of India above trust in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines.

The Act East widened India's strategic frame but its delivery has yet to catch up.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 10 marks

Discuss the ways and means to realise greater economic co-operation among the Member States of South Asia.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 5% against ASEAN's 25% → gap is one of delivery, not agreements → spine: cut the cost of crossing borders **R2** tariffs already cut, trade did not follow → wrong instrument → shift the target from tariffs to trade costs

Body flow

SAFTA's tariff-only design, NTBs untouched → non-tariff costs ~114% vs ASEAN's 76% → **Kathuria**: \$23bn actual / \$67bn potential → standards + border infrastructure over tariff cuts → **Menon**: FTA neither necessary nor sufficient → facilitation + professional secretariat → therefore project-based, sub-regional → energy as proof: Nepal → Bangladesh via Indian grid, 2024, first trilateral transaction → BBIN / BIMSTEC as carriers → India's non-reciprocal concessions

Counter-view

Batra: conflict itself depresses trade → disputed border becomes a barrier → India-Pakistan overrides the rest → economics alone cannot deliver

Conclusion routes

R1 visas + 'SAARC Minus' flexibility alongside → built upward from projects, not downward from summits **R2** the cheapest route runs through border costs, not summit declarations → deliver where politics already allows

South Asia holds a fourth of humanity, but intra-regional trade stays near 5% against 25% in ASEAN. The reason for this is delivery and not agreements.

Cooperation will grow by cutting the cost of crossing borders. SAFTA cut tariffs but left non-tariff untouched. These costs inside the region equal about 114% of goods value, against 76% in middle-income ASEAN. Sanjay Kathuria's World Bank study A Glass Half Full puts potential goods trade at \$67 billion against \$23 billion actual. Harmonised standards & border infrastructure matter more than fresh tariff cuts.

Jayant Menon argues that a free trade area is neither necessary nor sufficient. The trade facilitation and a professional secretariat deliver more.

Progress must be project-based & sub-regional. Nepal's hydro-power reached Bangladesh through the Indian grid in 2014 & is region's first trilateral power transaction. BBIN & BIMSTEC are important with India offering non-reciprocal concessions.

Amita Batra argues that conflict itself depresses trade. The disputed border becomes a barrier, and the India-Pakistan relationship overrides the rest.

Therefore, easier visas & 'SAARC Minus' flexibility must run alongside. Cooperation will be built upward from projects & not downward from summits.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 15 marks

What are the implications of 'Look-East' Policy on the north-eastern region of India?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 1991 turn east after Soviet collapse → policy changed the region's status, sealed frontier → transit space **R2** region practically landlocked → Look East made connectivity itself the Northeast's development policy

Body flow

first implication, economic: sea access via Siliguri or Bangladesh → DoNER budget ₹562.78 cr (2014-15) → ₹2,657.87 cr (2019-20) → second implication, dependence: future on corridors = future on territory India does not govern → **Raja Mohan**, slow implementation + weak connectivity → Misri, June 2026, Kaladan and trilateral highway stalled by security situation inside Myanmar → third implication, inward: ~220 ethnic groups, autonomy-to-statehood demands, corridors cross that ground → FMR scrapped + ten-year fencing plan, 1,643 km → line opened for cargo, hardened for kin → Manipur carries the highway, under President's Rule till Feb 2026

Counter-view

policy not the culprit → MP-IDSA 2026: credible, institutionalised presence; success turns on execution, not intent → **Baruah**: development spending and armed conflict coexisted well before 1991

Conclusion routes

R1 change of status is real → develops the region only where land, security, identity are settled **R2** where they are not settled, the corridor merely passes through the region

India turned east in 1991, after the collapse of Soviet Union. For the north-eastern region it did what no development package had. It changed the region's status, from sealed frontier to transit space.

Practically landlocked, the region reaches the sea through Siliguri or Bangladesh and connectivity became development policy. The NER ministry's budget rose from ₹562.78 crore in 2014-15 to ₹2657.87 crore in 2019-20.

C. Raja Mohan criticised their slow implementation and weak connectivity. In June 2026 Foreign Secretary said both Kaladan and the trilateral highway remain stalled by the security situation inside Myanmar.

8 states hold about 220 ethnic groups, whose demands run from autonomy to statehood and the corridors cross that ground. Scrapping the Free Movement Regime, and a 10 year fencing plan for the 1643 Km Myanmar border, harden a line that kinship straddles. Manipur which carries the highway was under President's rule until February 2026.

MP-IDSA's 2026 review states a credible, institutionalised presence in the east & success turns on execution rather than intent. Sanjib Baruah argues that development spending and armed conflict coexisted here long before 1991.

Therefore, the look east policy develops the region where land, security and identity questions are settled and elsewhere the corridor merely passes through.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 10 marks

What are the reasons for lack of 'regionness' in South Asia?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 regionness is a degree, not a fact of geography (**Hettne-Söderbaum**) → the level can fall as well as rise → South Asia: a region's material, not its politics **R2** the material is shared, the politics is not → because the founding act of these states was separation

Body flow

separation as the founding act (Partition, 1971, their wars) → national identity becomes a claim against a neighbour → **Muni**: non-Indian identity converting into anti-India sentiment → Pakistan: a working SAARC undoes partition → asymmetry (75% GDP, 70% people) → integration reads as dominance → institutional design (consensus rule + bilateral disputes excluded) → one quarrel halts the rest → no summit since 2014, trade near 5% → the level still falling (IWT in abeyance since April 2025; Dhaka asking for SAARC at a BIMSTEC table, July 2026)

Counter-view

the region does work where politics permits → Nepal's power to Bangladesh across the Indian grid, season after season → the deficit is political, not natural

Conclusion routes

R1 displaced, not absent → these states draw legitimacy from standing apart **R2** the region moves wherever politics allows it to → what is missing is a decision, not a basis

Regionners, according to Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum, is a degree that can fall as well as rise. South Asia has a region's material and not its politics.

Its states were built by separating from one another. Partition, 1971 & wars made national identity a claim against a neighbour. S.D. Muni states how the subcontinent's historical narrative builds a non-Indian identity among neighbours, which converts into anti-India sentiment. Pakistan views a working SAARC as undoing partition.

India holds over 75% of the region's GDP & 70% of its people and integration is viewed as dominance. No summit has met since 2014 & intra-regional trade stays near 5%.

The Indus Waters Treaty, which survived three wars, has stood in abeyance since April 2025. Dhaka focused on SAARC's revival in July this year but it was at a BIMSTEC meeting in Delhi.

Nepal sells power to Bangladesh across the Indian grid each season and the failure is political, not natural.

Regionness is displaced but not absent as these states draw their legitimacy from standing apart.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 10 marks

Why do ethnic conflicts and insurgencies continue to remain major impediments to regional co-operation in South Asia?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 no ethnic conflict in South Asia stays domestic → communities straddle the 1947 and 1971 lines → grievance against own state becomes charge against neighbour **R2** post-colonial state as colonial state with new rulers → centralisation regardless of identity → insurgencies invoking historical homelands

Body flow

Mallick, administrative straitjacket → Baloch / Chakma / Naga / Tamil insurgencies, homeland claims → working links cut first → Pakistan's Afghan crossings shut since Oct 2025 over the TTP → Central Asian transit stops with it → Kaladan and Trilateral Highway stalled inside Myanmar, June 2026 → SAARC charter bars bilateral questions + consensus rule

Counter-view

Ghoshal, dormancy to militancy turns on state capacity → Manipur's first Kuki-Zo talks, March 2026 → block is political, not permanent

Conclusion routes

R1 cooperation stays hostage until accommodation is treated as a security interest **R2** the border cuts through the community, so the ethnic question is regional by structure — no state settles its minority alone

In South Asia no ethnic conflict stays domestic. **Tamils, Madhesis, Bengalis, Pashtuns & Chin-Kuki communities** live across lines drawn in 1947 & 1971.

The grievance against one's own state becomes a charge against a neighbour. Ross Mallick describes it as colonial state with new rulers, forcing diverse societies into an administrative straitjacket regardless of identity. Baloch, Chakma, Naga & Tamil insurgencies followed, each invoking a historical homeland.

Pakistan has kept its Afghan crossings shut to trade since October 2025. In June 2026 India confirmed the Kaladan project & Trilateral Highway remain stalled by fighting inside Myanmar.

SAARC cannot absorb them as its charter excludes bilateral questions and it works by consensus. Baladas Ghoshal argues that these assertions move between dormancy & militancy with the state's capacity to accommodate grievances.

Manipur's 1st talks with Kuki-Zo representatives in March 2026 suggest the block is political & not permanent. Until accommodation is viewed as a security interest, regional cooperation stays hostage to it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

Discuss the significance of “West Asia Quad” in the light of India’s ‘Look West’ policy.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Oct 2021 foreign ministers → July 2022 summit → significance is not the “Quad” label but what it did to Look West
R2 old Look West = oil, remittances, distance from Arab quarrels → I2U2 converts it into a geoeconomic partnership

Body flow

pooled comparative advantage: Emirati capital + location / Israeli technology / Indian scale → two concrete projects: \$2bn food parks, 300 MW Gujarat hybrid → India as producer and supply-chain node, not buyer of energy and exporter of labour → political payoff: Washington outside the Indo-Pacific without alliance + de-hyphenation + alternative to Chinese economic presence → **Saraswat**, “transformational” → IMEC (Sept 2023) extends the same logic

Counter-view

hard security excluded by design → momentum slowed after October 2023 → **Vakil**: Palestine question + Gulf rivalries weaken political cohesion → 2026 Iran war, Hormuz closure, Chabahar waiver lapse → exposure sits where the grouping does not reach

Conclusion routes

R1 economic architecture gained, strategic architecture not yet
R2 Look West now has a delivery mechanism, but its security test lies outside I2U2’s remit

The I2U2, grouping India, Israel, the UAE & the US, began as a foreign ministers' meeting in October 2021 & became a leaders' summit in July 2022.

Its significance lies less in the "Quad" label than in what it did to look West i.e. turning a policy built on oil imports, remittances & distance from Arab quarrels into a geoeconomic partnership.

It works by pooling comparative advantage i.e. Emirati capital & location, Israeli tech, Indian scale & production. There is a \$2 billion of UAE investment in integrated food parks across India & a 300 MW hybrid renewable project in Gujarat with US & Israeli private participation. India enters as a producer & supply chain node & not only a buyer of energy & exporter of labour.

India work with US outside the Indo-Pacific without joining an alliance. It completes the de-hyphenation of its ties with Israel & Palestine & offers Gulf states an alternative to Chinese economic presence. Deepika Saraswat therefore views it as "a transformational development in India's West Asia policy." The India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor of September 2023 follows the same

Sanam Vakil argues that Israel's position on Palestine & Gulf rivalries weaken the political cohesion corridors need.

The 2026 war with Iran, the closure of Hormuz & the lapse of India's Chabahar waiver shows the India's real vulnerability.

Look West has therefore gained an economic architecture but not a strategic one.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 20 marks

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

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 not wound up, left unused → no summit since Kathmandu 2014 → Modi: through SAARC or outside it → India has followed that line
R2 charter works by unanimity, bilateral disputes excluded → one member can stall the body → future turns on what the substitutes can carry

Body flow

BIMSTEC = Bay of Bengal platform free of that veto / ASEAN = market + Indo-Pacific place → Bangkok Vision 2030 + maritime transport agreement, April 2025 → India's position: paused, not closed → **Menon**: BIMSTEC FTA unfinished since Phuket 2004, connectivity plan unimplemented → **Bhardwaj**: five of seven members South Asian, habits travelled across → smaller states built SAARC to bind India collectively → a power that picks its region binds itself to none → their stake in BIMSTEC falls too → Dhaka asks in Delhi, July 2026, that the two work together

Counter-view

Pandey: comparison misleading, judge BIMSTEC on its own mandate → it was never meant to include Pakistan or Afghanistan

Conclusion routes

R1 survives on paper → the only body covering all of South Asia
R2 revival waits on Pakistan — Indus Waters in abeyance, trade prohibited — not on a fresh charter

SAARC has not been wound up and it has been left unused. No summit has met since Kathmandu in 2014. There PM Modi said integration would go ahead "through SAARC or outside it, among all of us or some of us".

SAARC charter decides by unanimity & keeps bilateral disputes out and one member can stall the body. Its future turns on what the groupings India prefers can carry.

BIMSTEC offers a Bay of Bengal platform free of veto & ASEAN a market and a place in the Indo-Pacific. The 6th summit in 2025 adopted the Bangkok Vision 2030 & a maritime transport agreement.

Jayant Menon notes that the BIMSTEC-FTA is still unfinished 2 decades after the Phuket framework of 2004, and the connectivity master plan is unimplemented.

Sandeep Bhardwaj argues that 5 of BIMSTEC's 7 members are South Asian, so the subcontinent's habits travelled with it. The smaller states backed SAARC in the 1980s to bind India collectively. A power that picks its own region will not be bound by any and their stake in BIMSTEC falls too.

BIMSTEC's Secretary General India Mani Pandey calls the comparison misleading & asks that his grouping be judged on its own mandate.

SAARC is the only body covering all of South Asia & survives on paper. Therefore, its revival waits on relations with Pakistan, with the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance & trade prohibited since 2025 and not on a fresh charter.

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