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# NEW REALITIES, OLD FRONTLINES: INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD IN TRANSITION

BY  
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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS  
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**NEW BATTLES, OLD FAULT LINES: INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD IN  
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**BY PROF. RAHUL TRIPATHI**

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Prof. Rahul Tripathi's address offered a measured and analytically grounded assessment of the current state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and India's evolving neighbourhood policy. His core argument was neither pessimistic nor idealistic, but cautiously optimistic, recognising the structural weakness of regional cooperation while still affirming its strategic necessity.

He began by noting that over the last approximately ten years, SAARC has witnessed little tangible progress. Regional summits have been stalled, political engagement has weakened, and the organisation has not been able to adapt to new geopolitical and economic realities. A key illustration of this instructional draft is the South Asian University (SAU). Conceived as a flagship project to build a shared intellectual and academic space for South Asia, SAU was meant to strengthen people-to-people and knowledge-based regional integration. However, prof. Tripathi observed that its original agenda is no longer being clearly articulated or actively pursued. Instead, it has gradually moved away from its founding regional vision, reflecting the broader crisis of purpose within SAARC itself.

This stagnation is especially problematic because South Asia occupies a critical place in the Global South. Prof. Tripathi emphasised that if the region seeks to exercise greater influence in global affairs, it must first demonstrate coherence and stability in its own neighbourhood. India, in particular, cannot project as a leading power of its Global South while its immediate regional environment remains fragmented and conflict-prone. In this context, he invoked the well-known dictum: "You can choose your friends, not your neighbours." Geography is a permanent constraint, and regional relationships, however difficult, cannot be ignored or substituted.

This lecture's thematic frame, "New Battles, Old Fault Lines: India's Neighbourhood in Transition," captured this reality well. South Asia today faces new forms of strategic competition, economic vulnerability, and security challenges, yet these unfold along long-standing fault lines—unresolved borders, historical mistrust, and deeply embedded political rivalries. Rather than fading, these borders are increasingly becoming pressure points where regional and global power dynamics collide.

Prof. Tripathi also drew attention to generational change. The youth of today, he argued, are far more capable of distinguishing reality from political friction, and right from wrong. They are less inclined to accept inherited hostilities and more focused on practical outcomes such as opportunity, mobility, and stability. However, political elites remain overly burdened by historical narratives. While history is important, the

discussion cautioned against allowing it to dominate contemporary policy. The past should serve as a source of insight and inspiration, not as a script that must be endlessly replayed.

A particularly significant part of his argument concerned comparisons with China. Prof. Tripathi rejected the idea that India could simply replicate China's regional strategy. The two countries operate in fundamentally different neighbourhoods and under different global expectations. China's scale, political system, and geopolitical environment are not comparable to India's. South Asia is characterised by dense political sensitivities, democratic pressures, and overlapping identities. Therefore, India must pursue a distinct regional approach that reflects its own context rather than importing models that may be unsuitable.

In conclusion, Prof. Tripathi's message was clear: SAARC's future depends on whether South Asia, led by India, can move beyond stagnation and historical baggage to build a more cooperative and forward-looking regional order. Only a stable and integrated neighbourhood can allow India to credibly lead within the Global South and navigate the new battles unfolding along old fault lines.