

From Rivalry to Collaboration: India and the Future of South Asian Regionalism

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Abstract: South Asian regionalism, envisaged as a framework for cooperative development and collective security, has faced persistent challenges since the inception of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. The dominant narrative of Indian–Pakistani rivalry, structural asymmetries among member states, and the inability of SAARC to evolve into an effective multilateral institution have stymied regional integration and cooperation. In response, India has progressively reoriented its regional engagement toward alternative frameworks such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), aligning with its broader foreign policy goals including the “Act East” and “Neighbourhood First” initiatives. This paper examines India’s historical role and evolving strategies in South Asian regionalism, critically analysing the limitations of SAARC, the emergent collaborative prospects through sub-regional mechanisms, and India’s potential to reshape regional cooperation beyond the shadows of rivalry. By exploring political, economic, and security dimensions of regionalism, it highlights how India can transition from a posture defined by bilateral tensions to one that fosters inclusive cooperation, connectivity, and shared prosperity across South Asia. The study suggests that genuine regional collaboration will depend on structural reform of existing institutions, multifaceted cooperation in trade and infrastructure, and India’s diplomatic willingness to reconcile strategic interests with collective regional goals.

Keywords: India, South Asian regionalism, SAARC, BIMSTEC, regional cooperation, Indo-Pakistan rivalry, connectivity, foreign policy, multilateralism.

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Introduction

Regionalism in global politics refers to the process by which geographically proximate states institutionalize cooperation to advance common interests, enhance economic integration, improve security collaboration, and collectively manage transnational challenges. In South Asia—a region comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—the promise of regionalism has been particularly compelling. With nearly a quarter of the world’s population, abundant human capital, and significant economic potential, South Asia seemed poised for integration similar to other regional blocs such as ASEAN or the European Union. Yet, the reality has been starkly different: intraregional cooperation remains limited, intra-regional trade languishes at low levels, and political tensions—especially between India and Pakistan—continue to thwart meaningful progress. SAARC, designed to be the primary vehicle for South Asian cooperation, has struggled to fulfill its mandate, underscoring the need to reassess the dynamics of regionalism and explore new avenues for collaboration.

Historical Background of Regionalism in South Asia

The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia emerged in the late twentieth century, driven by a desire to facilitate economic growth, foster peace, and manage shared challenges. Responding to global trends and inspired by other regional blocs, the founding members—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan,

and Sri Lanka—established SAARC in 1985. Afghanistan joined in 2007, bringing the total membership to eight. SAARC’s objectives include accelerating economic growth, social progress, cultural development, and enhancing mutual cooperation across various sectors. Initial optimism was evident, and early initiatives sought to promote people-to-people contacts, cultural exchange, and technical cooperation. However, this early promise did not translate into sustained regional integration.

From the outset, SAARC was encumbered by the underlying political tensions between India and Pakistan. Their bilateral rivalry—rooted in the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and subsequent conflicts—affected SAARC’s ability to function as an effective multilateral forum. Despite procedural mechanisms designed to avoid political issues within SAARC, the deep-seated mistrust spilled over into the regional agenda, leading to stalled summits, fractured diplomacy, and an inability to implement robust regional policies.

India’s Role in Early South Asian Regionalism

As the largest and most populous member of SAARC, India occupies a central position in South Asian regionalism. Traditionally, New Delhi viewed regional cooperation as a means to enhance connectivity, economic interdependence, and cultural exchange with its neighbours. India’s geographic size, resource base, and economic potential meant that its leadership was vital for

any meaningful progress in SAARC initiatives. Yet, India's approach to regional cooperation has been shaped by its broader strategic interests, often prioritising bilateral relationships and national security considerations over collective institutional commitments.

Scholars argue that India's policy toward SAARC has lacked flexibility, particularly in accommodating the interests of smaller member states. The perception of Indian hegemonic behaviour—stemming from its dominant position in terms of territory, population, and economic power—has exacerbated the apprehensions of smaller states. This asymmetry has made it challenging to foster trust and consensus within SAARC, limiting the organisation's effectiveness. India's reluctance to concede influence or institutional authority to regional mechanisms has been cited as a significant factor in SAARC's underperformance.

The Indo-Pakistan Rivalry and Its Impact on Regionalism

The Indo-Pakistan rivalry is perhaps the most consequential factor shaping South Asian regionalism. Political and territorial disputes, particularly over the Kashmir region, have repeatedly derailed SAARC's activities. The 19th SAARC Summit, scheduled to be hosted in Islamabad in 2016, was indefinitely postponed after India and several other member states withdrew following a terrorist attack in India, for which New Delhi blamed Pakistan. Since then, SAARC has remained effectively dormant, with periodic calls for revival failing to gain traction amidst continuing bilateral tensions.

This protracted rivalry has transformed SAARC from a potential catalyst of integration into a target of bilateral political deadlock. The consensus-based decision-making mechanism of SAARC means that any member state can block progress, and in practice, the India-Pakistan dynamic has often led to stalemate. Efforts to advance economic cooperation, such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), have been hampered by protectionist policies, mistrust, and political posturing. Consequently, intraregional trade remains a fraction of global trade for South Asian countries, significantly lower than other regional blocs.

Emergence of Sub-regional Cooperation: BIMSTEC and Beyond

Frustrated by SAARC's stagnation, India has increasingly turned to sub-regional frameworks to pursue regional cooperation. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), established in 1997, has garnered attention as an alternative platform that excludes Pakistan and includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. India's strategic pivot to BIMSTEC aligns with its "Act East" policy, which seeks to deepen links with Southeast Asia and expand economic and strategic engagement eastward. BIMSTEC's agenda spans trade and investment, transport and communication, energy, tourism, and technology cooperation.

India's active promotion of BIMSTEC reflects a calculated response to the limitations of SAARC. By focusing on a grouping where political tensions are less pronounced, New Delhi aims to advance regional connectivity and economic integration without the constraints of Indo-Pakistan rivalry. BIMSTEC thus represents a form of "politics-free" regional cooperation that can yield more tangible outcomes in trade and infrastructure development. However, BIMSTEC also faces challenges, including slow progress on free trade agreements, disputes over market access,

and bureaucratic inertia. These limitations indicate that even sub-regional cooperation requires renewed commitment and stronger institutional mechanisms to realize its potential fully.

India's Strategic Reorientation and Policy Initiatives

India's foreign policy in recent decades exhibits a strategic reorientation that prioritizes regional collaboration through diversified mechanisms. The "Neighbourhood First" policy emphasises deeper bilateral engagement with neighbouring countries, focusing on economic development, connectivity projects, and people-to-people ties. By integrating this policy with its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, India seeks to position itself as a key driver of regional cooperation extending beyond South Asia into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Connectivity initiatives have become central to India's regional engagement. Projects such as road, rail, and energy infrastructure linkages aim to enhance physical connectivity across borders, facilitating trade and mobility. India's efforts to negotiate transport agreements and master plans for connectivity underscore the importance of infrastructure as a foundation for regional cooperation. These initiatives not only serve economic objectives but also build confidence among neighbouring states by generating shared benefits.

Towards Collaborative Regionalism: Prospects and Challenges

The future of South Asian regionalism hinges on overcoming entrenched rivalries and building inclusive frameworks that address shared challenges. Economic integration remains a critical area where regional cooperation can yield significant benefits. By reducing trade barriers, harmonising regulatory standards, and enhancing connectivity, South Asian countries can stimulate intraregional commerce and attract investment. However, achieving these goals requires institutional reform and political commitment from all members, particularly India and Pakistan.

Security cooperation presents both challenges and opportunities. Traditional security concerns, such as territorial disputes and military asymmetries, continue to complicate regional dialogue. Nevertheless, non-traditional security issues—climate change, disaster management, public health, and migration—offer avenues for collaborative responses that transcend bilateral rivalries. South Asia's collective vulnerability to environmental degradation and pandemics underscores the need for joint action, which could build trust and generate tangible benefits for the region.

India's Leadership and Responsibility

As South Asia's largest economy and most influential power, India bears a special responsibility in shaping the future of regionalism. New Delhi's willingness to act as a constructive leader—balancing its strategic interests with the collective good—will be crucial in fostering collaboration. This entails not only promoting alternative frameworks like BIMSTEC but also engaging in diplomatic dialogue to reinvigorate SAARC or reform it to better serve the region's needs. Structural reforms that reduce the dominance of any single member, establish stronger enforcement mechanisms, and promote equitable decision-making are essential to reviving SAARC's credibility and effectiveness.

India's engagement with extra-regional partners also plays a role in regional dynamics. Strategic partnerships with countries in

the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, and the United States, enhance India's capacity to contribute to regional stability. While such alliances may be driven by power competition with other great powers, they can also support regional initiatives by providing economic and security cooperation that benefits South Asian states.

Conclusion

South Asian regionalism stands at a crossroads. Decades of rivalry, structural imbalances, and institutional weaknesses have limited the region's collective potential. Yet, emerging pathways—such as sub-regional cooperation through BIMSTEC, enhanced connectivity initiatives, and collaborative responses to transnational challenges—offer grounds for optimism. India's evolving foreign policy reflects both the complexities and possibilities of regionalism. By leveraging its influence responsibly, fostering inclusive cooperation, and prioritising shared benefits over unilateral interests, India can help transition South Asian regionalism from a paradigm of rivalry to one of collaboration. The journey toward a more integrated and resilient South Asia will require sustained political will, innovative institutional design, and genuine partnership among all members.

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