

**INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY:
THE ROLE OF SUB-REGIONAL ARCHITECTURES**

THESIS SUBMITTED TO JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS

2024

BY
AMARTYA RAY

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
PROF. OMPRAKASH MISHRA
PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
KOLKATA

Certified that the Thesis entitled

‘INDIA’S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: THE ROLE OF SUB-REGIONAL ARCHITECTURES’ submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Prof. Omprakash Mishra, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor:

Candidate:

Dated:

Dated:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Omprakash Mishra, for his invaluable guidance, constant encouragement, and unwavering support throughout my PhD journey. His expertise and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping this research.

I am deeply indebted to the members of my Research Advisory Committee, Prof. Raj Kumar Kothari and Prof. Bijaya Kumar Das, for their insightful suggestions and constructive criticism. Their valuable contributions have significantly enhanced the quality of this work.

I am grateful to the Principal of Thakur Panchanan Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Dr. Rupa Bhawmick, for providing me with the necessary facilities and conducive environment to carry out my research. My sincere thanks to Dr. Tapas Pal and Sri Anirban Das for their friendship, support, and encouragement, which have made this journey bearable and practically possible.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family for their unconditional love, support, and sacrifices. Their belief in me has been my constant source of motivation. I wish my father was here to see this.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	V
LIST OF IMPORTANT ABBREVIATIONS	VII
LIST OF FIGURES	IX

INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS	1
-----------------------------------	----------

CHAPTER 1	32
------------------	-----------

India in South Asian Geo-political Space

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 General Overview
- 1.3 South Asia: Demography
- 1.4 South Asia: Cultural Diversity
- 1.5 South Asia: Economy
- 1.6 South Asia: Politics
- 1.7 South Asia: A Shared Political History
- 1.8 Partition and Its Role in South Asian History
- 1.9 Cold War and South Asia
- 1.10 Indian Dominance in South Asia
- 1.11 Major Challenges for India in South Asia
- 1.12 The Disruptive Effects of the Chinese BRI in South Asia
- 1.13 The Question of Leadership of India
- 1.14 Conclusion

CHAPTER 2	76
------------------	-----------

India's Bilateral Ties with South Asian Neighbours (1): Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 India-Pakistan Relations
 - 2.2.1 History of Conflicts
 - 2.2.2 Nuclear Race
 - 2.2.3 Current Trends
- 2.3 India-Bangladesh Relations
 - 2.3.1 Historical ties
 - 2.3.2 Cooperation in Different Sectors
 - 2.3.3 Challenges Ahead
- 2.3.4 Latest Trends

- 2.4 India-Sri Lanka Relations
 - 2.4.1 India in the Ethnic Conflict of Sri Lanka
 - 2.4.2 Economic Relations
 - 2.4.3 Development Cooperation between India and Sri Lanka
 - 2.4.4 The Chinese Inroad
 - 2.4.5 Current Trends
- 2.5 India-Maldives Relations
 - 2.5.1 'India Factor' in Maldivian Politics
 - 2.5.2 Trade and Economic Cooperation with the Maldives
 - 2.5.3 Indian Concerns in Maldives
 - 2.5.4 Current Trends
- 2.6 Conclusion

CHAPTER 3

138

India's Bilateral Ties with South Asian Neighbours (2): Nepal and Bhutan

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 India-Nepal Relations
 - 3.2.1 Developmental Cooperation between India and Nepal
 - 3.2.2 The Uniqueness of the Ties
 - 3.2.3 Irritants in Bilateral Ties
 - 3.2.4 Current Trends
- 3.3 India-Bhutan Relations
 - 3.3.1 The Unique Friendship
 - 3.3.2 India's Developmental Assistance to Bhutan
 - 3.3.3 Trade
 - 3.3.4 India's Role in Bhutan's Democratic Transition
 - 3.3.5 The China Factor
- 3.4 Conclusion

CHAPTER 4

172

India's Engagement with Afghanistan and Myanmar

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 India-Afghanistan Relations
 - 4.2.1 Ups and Downs in Indo-Afghan Diplomatic Ties
 - 4.2.2 The India-Pakistan-Afghanistan Triangle
 - 4.2.3 India's Engagement in Post-Taliban Era (2001-2021)
 - 4.2.4 The Rise of Taliban and the Indian Response (2021 onwards)
 - 4.2.5 Afghanistan in Larger Strategic Calculus
- 4.3 India-Myanmar Relations
 - 4.3.1 Economic Ties
 - 4.3.2 Security Ties
 - 4.3.3 People to People Contact

- 4.3.4 Connectivity
- 4.3.5 Strategic Significance of Myanmar
- 4.4 Conclusion

CHAPTER 5

212

Regionalism in South Asia: The Rise and Decline of SAARC

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Regionalism: A Theoretical Exposition
- 5.3 An Overview of Regionalism in South Asia
- 5.4 SAARC
 - 5.4.1 Economic Integration under SAARC
 - 5.4.2 Political Cooperation under SAARC
 - 5.4.3 India in SAARC
 - 5.4.4 SAARC at Present
- 5.5 Conclusion

CHAPTER 6

245

India in Sub-regional Organisations: BIMSTEC, MGC, and IORA

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 The BIMSTEC
 - 6.2.1 Evolution of BIMSTEC and Its Prospects
 - 6.2.2 India in the BIMSTEC
- 6.3 The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)
 - 6.3.1 Importance of the Mekong River in Southeast Asia
 - 6.3.2 The US-China Strategic Competition in the LMB, and India
 - 6.3.3 India in the MGC
- 6.4 The IORA
 - 6.4.1 The Potential of IORA
 - 6.4.2 India in the IORA
 - 6.4.3 Significance of the IOR for India
- 6.5 Conclusion

CHAPTER 7

281

India in Sub-regional Initiatives: BBIN and IMTT Highway

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 BBIN
 - 7.2.1 Evolution of BBIN
 - 7.2.2 The BBIN MVA
 - 7.2.3 Other Areas of Cooperation
 - 7.2.4 The Way Ahead
- 7.3 The IMTT Highway

7.3.1 Development of the ‘Highway to the East’
7.3.2 Challenges Ahead
7.4 Conclusion

CONCLUSION TO THE THESIS

308

BIBLIOGRAPHY

i-xxiii

PREFACE

India's neighbourhood has been a focal point of its foreign policy for decades. Traditional bilateral relations have formed the bedrock of this engagement. However, the limitations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have necessitated a multifaceted approach. This thesis, titled 'India's Neighbourhood Policy: The Role of the Sub-regional Architectures', explores India's strategic pivot towards sub-regional cooperation as a complement to its bilateral ties.

By examining India's involvement in BIMSTEC, BBIN, MGC, IORA, and the IMTT Highway, this study analyses how these platforms have been utilised to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the region. A central argument is that while sub-regionalism holds immense potential, India's overzealous pursuit of multiple initiatives simultaneously has diluted its impact and limited its attainments. The thesis posits that a more strategic and a phased/incremental approach is essential for maximising the benefits of sub-regional cooperation mechanisms. By prioritising smaller, more achievable goals and building upon successes, India can effectively leverage these platforms to enhance its regional influence and address shared challenges of the region.

This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of India's neighbourhood policy by examining the interplay between bilateral relations and sub-regional cooperation, keeping the regional efforts in between. It provides insights into the complexities of regional dynamics and offers recommendations for optimising India's engagement in the region.

The dynamic nature of international relations poses significant challenges to research, particularly when focusing on contemporary phenomena. The present study is no exception. Initiated in January 2020, its trajectory was inevitably influenced by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global catalyst for unprecedented geopolitical shifts. Concurrently, India's neighbourhood, the core

focus of this research, underwent rapid and complex transformations. Multiple regime changes, often accompanied by internal strife, rendered the task of maintaining analytical rigour a formidable challenge. The intricate interplay between these domestic and regional developments necessitated constant recalibration of the research framework. For example, this research proposed that India's engagement with Bangladesh had been heavily dependent on the Hasina administration; and a change in the top post in Dhaka might force India to reconfigure and reboot its ties with the important neighbour. This has actually happened, but only in August 2024 when the thesis is ready to be submitted. Naturally, few things have remained somewhat open-ended or have been addressed in a different backdrop. In all, like most of the researches in social science based on contemporary developments, this research is also limited in that respect.

LIST OF IMPORTANT ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN-	Association of South East Asian Nation
BBIN-	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal
BIMSTEC-	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Economic Development
BRI-	Belt and Road Initiative
EU-	European Union
FDI-	Foreign Direct Investment
FMR-	Free Movement Regime
FTA-	Free Trade Agreement
FY-	Financial Year
GDP-	Gross Domestic Product
HEP-	Hydroelectric Projects
ICP-	Integrated Check Post
IMTT Highway-	India Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway
IOR-	Indian Ocean Region
IORA-	Indian Ocean Rim Association
ITEC-	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
KMTTP-	Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project
LMB-	Lower Mekong Basin
LoC-	Line of Credit
MGC-	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation
MoU-	Memorandum of Understanding

MVA- Motor Vehicle Agreement

RCEP- Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

SAARC- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

SAFTA- South Asian Free Trade Agreement

SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region

SAGQ- South Asia Growth Quadrangle

SAPTA- South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement

SASEC- South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation

UNSC- United Nations Security Council

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Political map of South Asia	P 35
Figure 2: Linguistic diversity of South Asia	P 40
Figure 3: Map of undivided British India. Also showing British Ceylon and other neighbours	P 56
Figure 4: The map of the Princely State of Kashmir in 1947	P 78
Figure 5: Transboundary rivers of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar	P 102
Figure 6: International shipping lanes passing by Sri Lanka	P 109
Figure 7: Sri Lankan map depicting different zones controlled by the government and the LTTE	P 112
Figure 8: Strategic location of Maldives on the Indian Ocean	P 124
Figure 9: Strategic location of Nepal between India and China	P 140
Figure 10: The India-Nepal-China trijunction in the Kalapani region	P 154
Figure 11: Strategic location of Bhutan between India and China	P 161
Figure 12: Afghanistan's strategic location like a land bridge between South and West/ Central Asia	P 174
Figure 13: Afghanistan-Pakistan border	P 178
Figure 14: Myanmar in India's eastern borders as a bridge with the Southeast Asia	P 193
Figure 15: KMTTP plan	P 206
Figure 16: SAARC after 2007	P 223
Figure 17: the BIMSTEC on map	P 248
Figure 18: the MGC countries on world map	P 257
Figure 19: IORA member states on world map	P 266
Figure 20: BBIN area	P 286
Figure 21: The route of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway	P 297

India's Neighbourhood Policy: The Role of Sub-Regional Architectures

Introduction to the thesis

1. Background

From discipline to discipline, the idea of 'region' varies. More often than not academics of different backgrounds tend to agree that regions are culturally constituted though; whether they study sociology, history, international relations or comparative politics. As, following this argument, territories are socially constituted, they are frequently politically contested.¹ How political actors understand and interpret the concept of a region, including notions of 'regionness', is probably the single most crucial factor to comprehend a region because regions are built.² Furthermore, some observers predict that in the near future, the concept of 'region' could go through radical changes as the world becomes shaped by technology more and more. In these 'virtual regions', people from all over the world who have similar interests or beliefs come collectively to form forums through technology.³ Nevertheless, the component of 'geographic proximity' is yet to become totally redundant in defining a region; especially in the more restrictive definition of term.⁴ In such a context, like many other parts of the globe, there is no clear 'vision' for where South Asia starts and ends geographically.⁵ To be sure, political and ideational

¹Hettne, B. (2006). Beyond the 'New' Regionalism. *New Political Economy*, 10(4), 543–571.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460500344484>

² Ibid.

³Jarrar, Y. (2016, December 9). *By 2030, what will regional governance look like?* World Economic Forum. Retrieved April 29, 2024, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/by-2030-what-will-regional-governance-look-like/>

⁴Behr, T., & Jokela, J. (2011). Regionalism & Global Governance: the Emerging Agenda. In *Studies & Research. Notre Europe*. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/regionalism_globalgovernance_t.behr-j.jokela_ne_july2011_01.pdf

⁵Arndt, M. (2013). *India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

characteristics of regions have become more important than geography when it comes to the components of regions in recent years.⁶ From this perspective, South Asia is quite unusual as a region. Generally, politico-strategic balance plays as an important motivation in encouraging regional initiatives, along with enabling closer and wider cooperation mechanisms; but South Asia is clearly fraught with political disharmony and strategic division.⁷ Because of this particular attribute, South Asia has always been considered more of a ‘formal’ rather than a ‘real’ region. As its member states lack both a common strategic objective and an aligning worldview, classifying the constellation of these states as a region seems symbolic at times.

According to the Regional Security Complex Theory, associated with the Copenhagen School, the war of words between India and Pakistan explains the security complex in South Asia from the standpoint of regional security.⁸ Though in the last couple of decades India’s security interests have spread outside the limits of South Asia as a result of its economic and political ascent, yet the overall pattern of South Asian dynamics regarding security continues to remain the same. China’s increasing strategic entry into South Asia, coupled with India’s own interests in defending its territorial integrity around the neighbourhood, and fostering relationships with other countries with converging interests throughout the Indo-Pacific region, have only heightened tension between China and India; both within the region and throughout the larger Indo-Pacific theatre. Consequently, India has adapted to the new realities and is modifying its views on regional as well as sub-regional institutions within this strategic framework.

⁶Behr, T., & Jokela, J. (2011). Regionalism & Global Governance: the Emerging Agenda. In *Studies & Research*. Notre Europe. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/regionalism_globalgovernance_t.behr-j.jokela_ne_july2011_01.pdf

⁷Tiwari, C. K. (1985). South Asian Regionalism: Problems and Prospects. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 12(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1985.9933657>

⁸Buzan, B., & Waever, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: the structure of international security* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.

The idea of regionalism has changed significantly from the narrow adherence to free trade arrangements along with security alliances that prevailed until the 1970s, with the rise of a concept known as the ‘new regionalism’ which had begun to emerge by the mid-1980s.⁹ The emergence of multi-polarity and other significant transformations that seemed imminent in the global politics and order led to the formation of the new regionalism, which was in contrast to the ideas and methods of ‘old regionalism’ or traditional regionalism that developed in the framework of Cold War politics.¹⁰ The proponents of the concept argued that what they were presenting was fundamentally different and progressive, and it was also claimed to be more comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional than old/ traditional regionalism. Moreover, the new regionalism was apparently more spontaneous in terms of process and it contained the ability to spring up from below.¹¹

India’s post-independence strategy on regionalism was significantly influenced by the country’s commitment to the ideals of world peace and neutrality from big power politics. From the perspective of idealism, which was prevalent for some time after gaining independence, the ‘region’ was viewed by the Indian leadership as the whole of the Asian continent; and, from that point of view, if taken into consideration, India was a keen advocate of regionalism. A number of conferences aimed at this objective were either hosted or attended by Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of Indian foreign policy, during the 1940s and the 1950s; some of which include the Asian Relations Conference (1947), the Colombo Conference (1954) or the Bandung Asian-African Conference (1955). Thus, early regional activities in India were essentially framed broadly

⁹Fawcett, L. (2005). Regionalism from an Historical Perspective. In M. Farrell, B. Hettne, & L. V. Langenhove (Eds.), *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice* (1st ed., pp. 21–37). Pluto Press.

¹⁰Hettne, B., & Soderbaum, F. (1998). The New Regionalism Approach. *Politeia*, 17(3), 6–21.
https://www.academia.edu/5747413/The_New_Regionalism_Approach

¹¹Ibid.

around two objectives: to advance world peace, and to encourage collaboration between Asian and African countries.¹² Nonetheless, these early attempts were unable to establish regional institutions due to the lack in a defined geographic extent or forming of a ‘regional clarity’ as such, and strong opposition to any kind of collective security arrangement. In addition, India's strategy for promotion of Asian regionalism was primarily intellectual and politically focused, with little emphasis placed on practical matters such as economic cooperation.¹³ On the contrary, rather, in his aspirational goal of fostering Asian solidarity, Nehru sometimes, however unintentionally, demonstrated a propensity to ignore the smaller neighbours. Nehru, as it seems, hardly ever considered making a community with the smaller near neighbours employing due diligence that it required. He probably thought his larger vision of Asian solidarity would automatically include and take along these neighbours.¹⁴

In the late 1970s, the necessity of a regional forum for South Asia became apparent and the notion gained traction, despite India's continued scepticism towards the idea. There were two reasons for India to be hesitant in the beginning. First, India was worried that a regional body would provide an opportunity for its smaller neighbours to band together. This would negate its favoured method of bilateralism and create space for the ‘regionalisation’ of bilateral issues, thereby affecting how it approaches its immediate neighbours. Second, the institutionalisation of majority decision-making alarmed India. This could have an impact on its ‘freedom in foreign affairs’, it believed.¹⁵ When calls for the formation of SAARC between the smaller neighbours grew, India made the decision to join the regional organisation after making sure that the fundamental tenets of the

¹²Arndt, M. (2013). *India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Muni, S. D. (1985). SARC: Building Regionalism from below. *Asian Survey*, 25(4), 391–404.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2644225>

¹⁵Dash, K. C. (2008). *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930366>

regional forum include consensus of members with regard to outside funding or intervention, exclusion of bilateral and contested topics, and unanimity on decisions made at all levels.¹⁶ Because of its cultural and geographic linkages to every country in South Asia, which is historically deep in nature, the region continues to be essential to India's internal growth and stability as well as its ability to interact with the outside world. Though India never denied such a reality, neither it was very eager to give that an institutional shape. The call for SAARC, amidst a host of other successful regional platforms across the globe, made New Delhi rethink and readjust its earlier stand. In order for the SAARC project to succeed, New Delhi too had a stake in it. This was due, not so much to India's faith in SAARC's future as it was to the fact that a dead SAARC at India's behest would merely make India's neighbourhood policy ever more challenging along with its global profile more unpalatable.¹⁷

Since the 1990s, the idea of 'collective prosperity' has served as a fundamental tenet of India's new regional strategy. Political divides within SAARC continued to be a barrier, but this time around New Delhi was more enthusiastic to let the grouping work than it was during the 1980s. The essential reason for New Delhi's redrawing of strategy was the new emerging realities of a post-Cold War world which incidentally coincided with China's rise and India's path to liberalisation of its economy. Despite somewhat unresponsive reactions from the neighbouring capitals, which ranged from a lack of will to suspicion, Indian officials consistently pitched for this new approach.

One crucial aspect of the concept of new regionalism is the bottom-up approach, as we have already discussed. Following cue from this line of thought, the notion of a sub-regional approach

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Muni, S. D. (1985). SARC: Building Regionalism from below. *Asian Survey*, 25(4), 391–404.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2644225>

opened new avenues for South Asian regional development. This has been referred to as the sub-regional methodology for achieving regional integration across South Asia and some described this as SAARC taking an approach of sub-regionalism.¹⁸ With this strategy, New Delhi was able to get around the SAARC framework.

In an effort to strengthen regional harmony and to encourage economic progress in South Asia, with a focused and project-based strategy, four SAARC members from the north and east, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal established the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) in 1997, marking the first instance of so-called ‘collaborative sub-regionalism’.¹⁹ Outside the SAARC framework also, India supported and took part in the promotion of several other sub-regional platforms during this time. The BIMSTEC came into being around the same time with Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand as founding members (it was named as BIST-EC at that time). India’s eastward drive further continued with the formation of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative in 2000; taking five mainland Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia into a socio-cultural collaboration mechanism. That same year, in 2000, along with Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Yemen, Tanzania, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Mozambique, India and South Africa jointly established the ‘Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation’ (IOR-ARC), later to be renamed as IORA, with an aim of freer and better flow of commodities, goods and services, capital, and technology throughout the Indian Ocean region and among the member states.

¹⁸Yhome, K., & Maini, T. S. (2017). India’s Evolving Approach to Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond [Journal-article]. *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 2(3), 147–165. <https://rpquarterly.kureselcalismalar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/vol2.3-yhome-maini.pdf>

¹⁹DECLARATION OF THE NINTH SAARC SUMMIT. (1997, May). SAARC. Retrieved April 30, 2024, from <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/resources/summit-declarations/14-ninth-saarc-summit-male-1997/file>

People in the power corridors of New Delhi gradually came to acknowledge with varying degrees of frankness that India, not only because of its size but also because of its greater resourcefulness, bears a bigger duty to work towards the development of positive and cooperative neighbourhood ties.²⁰ If India's efforts and attention do not remain overly restricted to the South Asian region and it enjoys stronger support and understanding from its neighbours, it may also benefit more from its overall foreign policy endeavours. It wasn't until the mid-2000s though, that India's reorientation of its regional strategy which had started in the early 1990s and was exemplified by the introduction of the 'Look East policy' and the 'Gujral Doctrine', took on strategic significance. By the turn of the 20th century, developments within India and the surroundings had a significant impact on India's regional diplomacy, making it necessary for New Delhi to re-evaluate its regional policy.

India's new regional approach has been greatly influenced by two strategic considerations in particular.²¹ It witnessed extraordinary economic development as a result of the economic liberalisation implemented in the early 1990s and keeping regional instability under control has been imperative to maintain that trajectory of growth.²² China was the second strategic factor. New Delhi's regional calculations have grown increasingly concerned about China's potential to expand its hold on power across South Asia and beyond.²³ The Gujral Doctrine highlighted that India should extend greater generosity to the smaller neighbours as being the larger one, while the 'Manmohan Singh Doctrine', during the mid-2000s, focused on the idea of sharing India's growth

²⁰Muni, S. D. (1985). SARC: Building Regionalism from below. *Asian Survey*, 25(4), 391–404.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2644225>

²¹Yhome, K. (2017). 'Acting East' through India's Subregions. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved August 9, 2023, from https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ORF_Occasional_Paper_123_Acting_East.pdf

²²Menon, S. (2007, May 3). "India and International Security." In *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*. International Institute of Strategic Studies. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/1863/Speech+by+Foreign+Secretary+Shri+Shivshankar+Menon+on+India+and+International+Security+at+the+International+Institute+of+Strategic+Studies>

²³Raja Mohan, C. (2006). Cooperative Security in South Asia. *South Asian Studies*, 13, 345–356.

with them. It was done in the hopes that an interwoven economy and its benefits would restrain these neighbours from going against Indian interests, and this would also limit the impact of any otherwise unpredictable development in those countries on the Indian economy.

2. Statement of the problem

Regional cooperation is one of the most popular forms of engagement for states in the modern world. Shared boundaries sometimes create shared interests which make the road for closer ties and more agreeable accommodation in the international arena. These regional arrangements may be of economic, social, political, and security by characteristics, or any complex blend of these types. In some cases, state-led actions have been the cause for such cooperation; while in other cases, the development of ties has been more of a market-led phenomenon.

Functional cooperation refers to limited arrangements that are agreed between/ among states in order to work in some particular area/s; for example, in transport, energy, or health.²⁴ There are no necessary connections among these different areas of cooperation. They may work independently of each other, or they may work collectively and in conjunction as well. These kinds of agreements do not change or harm the legal personality of a sovereign state nor does it leave any consequences for them in terms of international law.

²⁴Gochhayat, A. (2014). Regionalism and sub-regionalism: A theoretical framework with special reference to India. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 8(1), 10–26.
<https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2013.0611>

South Asia is home to a population of about 2 billion, which accounts for a little more than 25% of the world population,²⁵ but it contributes only about 10% of the world's GDP (PPP),²⁶ and about 4% of world trade. It has been among the slowly growing regions of the world accounting for about 29% of the total world population living in poverty, according to the preliminary Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report (2018) by the World Bank.²⁷ The reason, in part, could be attributed to the inward-looking policies pursued by the governments in these economies, and also the political differences that make them uneasy to come closer.

The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first mooted in the early 1980s by Ziaur Rahman, the then President of Bangladesh. After consultations, the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries (the eighth, Afghanistan, became a member in 2007) met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981. This was followed up by a meeting of the Foreign Ministers in New Delhi in August 1983. In this ministerial meeting, the parties involved agreed on a 'Declaration on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)'; and, the ministers also formally adopted an Integrated Programme of Action, or the IPA. Then the heads of the states or governments, at their First Summit held in Dhaka on 7-8 December 1985, adopted the Charter formally establishing the SAARC.

The leaders assumed regional cooperation and its more advanced form of regional economic integration would enable SAARC countries to integrate more efficiently with the rest of the world

²⁵*Population of Southern Asia (2024) - Worldometer.* (2024, April 25). Retrieved April 26, 2024, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-asia-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Southern,among%20subregions%20ranked%20by%20Population.>

²⁶*GDP based on PPP, Share of the World.* (2024). International Monetary Fund. Retrieved April 26, 2024, from <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/SAQ>

²⁷*South Asia Regional Micro Database (SARMD).* (2019, July 22). World Bank. Retrieved July 27, 2024, from https://worldbank.github.io/SARMD_guidelines/poverty-measures.html

and take fuller advantage of global flows of investment, technology, and trade opportunities. A region which was extremely poverty-stricken and backward, took this regional grouping to be the remedy for, if not all, some of their perennial problems. Unfortunately though, this positive note could not be maintained for long for many reasons. The changing dynamics of international politics in the latter half of the 1980s, which was finally marked by the fall of the Soviet bloc, had a profound effect on South Asian politics. It brought a lot of undercurrents of the region to the fore, which was so far kept under the carpet thanks to the big power politics. The main hindrances to the success of SAARC are discussed below.

First, India-Pakistan rivalry. The Kashmir issue, and claims and counterclaims on militancy from both sides, never let New Delhi and Islamabad have that much breathing space when they could explore other areas where cooperation was possible. The violence that erupted in the Kashmir valley in the early 1990s, and the resultant mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from there, took the working relationship to a new low. The demolition of Babri mosque in Ayodhya and then the Mumbai blasts in the following years made the situation even worse.

Second, the situation in the domestic political arena of other member nations was not so bright as well. Conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Maoist rebellion in Nepal, the rise of the Taliban and global terrorist networks in Afghanistan had threatened peace in this region, and made this region a less preferred destination for the foreign investors.

Third, there was a fear that India being a disproportionately large country accounting for more than three-quarter of the region's GDP (77.82% in 2022)²⁸ would eat up the share of other

²⁸World Bank Open Data. (n.d.). In *World Bank*. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=8S-IN>

countries. However, many experiences within the region, since then, demonstrated that advantages outweighed initial misgivings. For example, India and Sri Lanka operationalised a bilateral trade agreement in 2000, and within a decade, by 2011-12, trade volume between the two grew 8 times, crossing the USD 5 billion mark.²⁹ Even the trade gap has also been reduced by two thirds since then. Likewise, hydroelectricity export to India is a major source of Bhutan's GDP. In 2021, Bhutan exported about 74% of its total hydroelectric produce to India, and in 2022, it earned revenue of 2448 crore rupees.³⁰

As SAARC started faltering in delivery of its promises soon after its establishment for the complexities arising out of several reasons, like the three mentioned above, India started looking for alternative paths of engagement, where these roadblocks could be side-stepped. In such a backdrop, a growth quadrangle initiative comprising Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the north-eastern states of India had been developed to speed up the process of economic integration. This sub-regional setting in the form of a growth quadrangle was conceptualised as an effective solution to the socio-economic underdevelopment of the sub-region, bypassing the biggest obstacle to regional cooperation, which was Indo-Pak political tensions. Growth Triangles/ Quadrangles were in vogue among the ASEAN members in the 1990s, and that provided a cue in development of this grouping. Moreover, this sub-regional platform was in tune with India's newly designed foreign policy programme, the Look East Policy, a brainchild of the Narsimha Rao-led government of that time.

²⁹High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka. (2013). *HANDBOOK ON THE INDIA - SRI LANKA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT*. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://hcicolombo.gov.in/pdf/hb-india-sl.pdf>

³⁰Chaudhury, D. R. (2024, March 23). India, Bhutan explore setting up of new hydropower projects. *The Economic Times*. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/power/india-bhutan-explore-setting-up-of-new-hydropower-projects/articleshow/108737630.cms?from=mdr>

The objective of the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) was to enhance collaboration in the areas of environment, energy and power, trade and investment, transport, and tourism. The SAARC officially endorsed the SAGQ in 1997. The members then sought both financial assistance and technical guidance from the Asian Development Bank; and, with the ADB's recognition it transformed into the SASEC (South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation) Program in 2001. In May 2014, Maldives and Sri Lanka joined as new member countries. In February 2017, Myanmar joined SASEC as its seventh member. As of February 2023, the SASEC countries have executed 79 capital investment projects financed by the ADB. These projects, which focus mainly on the transport, trade facilitation, energy, economic corridor, and health sectors, have a total value of approximately USD 18.41 billion.³¹ For a region with so much potential as South Asia, this looks meagre, both in degree and volume.

India has been thus an early starter with regard to sub-regional cooperation, but its efforts, over time, got diluted due to creating or participating in so many of such arrangements. For instance, the SASEC looks like a mini-SAARC minus Pakistan and Afghanistan and plus Myanmar. Then there's BIMSTEC which has the same members as the SASEC minus Maldives and plus Thailand. Again, there is another cooperation platform in the shape of the MGC, which includes Myanmar and Thailand, which are members of the BIMSTEC as well, plus Myanmar being a part of the SASEC too. There is another, larger and with greater mandate, mechanism in the form of IORA, which takes into its fold the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, including India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Maldives, all of whom are members of the other three above-mentioned

³¹*What is SASEC?* (n.d.). SASEC. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=what-is-sasec>

initiatives. As a whole, these overlapping initiatives with more or less same goals make the overall objectives less achievable and render each one of them directionless.

In spite of goodwill on its part, the problem lies in India's commitment, almost to the level of being quixotic, to a number of regional and sub-regional platforms which ultimately thins down its resource allocation to all of them. Rather a step-by-step approach, strengthening one at a time, and starting from the smallest and easiest one, like the BBIN, and then moving on to the BIMSTEC, and further on to the MGC and the IORA could have been beneficial to build up an interconnected and interwoven neighbourhood; especially in the face of aggressive Chinese foreign policy. Without streamlining its efforts in the neighbourhood, especially with regard to the sub-regional platforms that are full of promises, India's neighbourhood policy has been unable to meet its desired objectives. The present thesis is thus an attempt to understand and analyse the dynamic nature of the broader regional undertakings at the level of South Asia as a whole and the cooperation ventures and endeavours at a level lesser than the regional level.

3. Hypothesis

India engages with its neighbours at both bilateral and multilateral levels; on one-on-one basis, and at different platforms of regional or sub-regional character. Despite favouring bilateralism, New Delhi's approach towards multilateralism has evolved in the last four decades, especially in accepting the essential nature of such efforts. When SAARC emerged as the platform for regional cooperation in South Asia, India's engagement with it should be looked at from this perspective. As we have noted, for a number of reasons SAARC fell short of its expectations, and it has become totally dormant since the 2014 summit. As a complementary, not conflicting, means to SAARC, India started experimenting with some sub-regional organisations as early as in the mid-1990s.

Realising SAARC's inability to overcome bilateral frictions among the member-states, it was seen as a necessary step to engage the neighbours in other sub-regional initiatives, to keep on the path of economic development while ensuring a peaceful neighbourhood. Experiencing some initial successes, New Delhi's conviction in these minilaterals grew and it started either establishing or participating in such groupings with visible enthusiasm. Stretching its commitment to so many such initiatives have ultimately led to thinning down of energy and resource allocation to each one of them though; and this has led to a noticeable inertia in all of them lately. Undoubtedly, to keep an assertive China's expanding strategic footprint in the neighbourhood in check and safeguarding its interests in the Indian Ocean region, it is necessary to get involved in such architectures. Moreover, given the complexities involved in building and sustaining regionalism in South Asia, it is imperative too. Overlapping sub-regional mechanisms with similar goals do nothing but strain on limited resources; and failing on commitments do more harm than not committing at all.

Hypothesis advanced here for testing is whether sub-regional architectures can work as an alternative, or complementary, to regional cooperation mechanism in India's neighbourhood policy and whether a step by step approach, starting with the smaller ones like BBIN and moving on to the larger ones like the BIMSTEC probably would have been more beneficial in place of diving into all of them at once.

4. Literature Review

In social sciences, it is quite difficult to define concepts and to identify processes; but without attempting both, it is impossible to start a scientific inquiry as well. As a result, no study does take a shape without first looking at some pertinent literature that throws light upon the issues under investigation. The research concerns itself primarily with concepts of regionalism, and sub-

regionalism as a subset of the former; and the process of regionalisation in South Asia. An excellent account of this can be found in 'Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice', edited by Mary Farrell, Bjorn Hettne, and Luk Van Langenhove; published by the Pluto Press in 2005. As an edited volume, it covers an extensive area and examines almost every aspect of what we call regionalism today. Among the essays, some need special discussion though. The very first essay by the editor Mary Farrell herself, 'the Global Politics of Regionalism: An Introduction', shows how the Westphalian state system has come under a barrage of attacks to the traditional notion of sovereignty by the forces of globalisation. It underlines the propensity of governments of relatively weaker states to band together in the form of cooperative decision making to negotiate global flows of capital, investment and technology; in reality 'power'. Not only states, it highlights that non-state actors also engage in extensive and cross-border networks to face the heat. It also points out that, though much fanfare were seen initially, the European model of regional cooperation could not be emulated elsewhere; and, it only supports the basic argument of the volume that regionalism as a reaction to globalisation has spatial dimension and no single formula has been and will be successful for the entire world. The essay strongly advocates the dynamism of regions, and clearly says these are neither formal organisations nor they are given; rather, they are shaped and reshaped in the process of global transformation.

In the same volume, in her essay 'Regionalism from an Historical Perspective', Louise Fawcett tries to differentiate between the terms regionalism and regionalisation, which are often confusing, with the help of comparative history technique. She offers a historical perspective to analyse the modern debates on regionalism; and while doing so, she argues that the process of regionalism is equally influenced by the existing norms, trends and values as it is by socio-political or geographic environment. Interestingly, Fawcett uses the idea of Whitehead, and argues that regionalism also

has a 'contagion' effect like that of the process of democratisation. Andrew Hurrell, in his essay in the volume, points out that a regional level analysis of global politics has been historically neglected; and he argues this is one of the main reasons for failure to generate theories on regionalism. Like Farrell, Hurrell also believes that expectation of mirroring the European experience has been detrimental to real growth of regionalism in other parts of the globe. Hurrell believes regional efforts and actors involved are heterogeneous in character; and the process itself comes up from below as much as it comes down from above.

In his essay, 'Exploring the Links between Micro-Regionalism and Macro-regionalism', Fredrik Soderbaum tries to classify the regions into three categories, Macro, Sub, and Micro-regions and shows their positional differences in the global affairs. Soderbaum also negates the idea of a predetermined region and to establish his case he points to the Constructivist and Reflectivist perspectives which emphasise regional space to be a lot more elusive and multifaceted in the present world than it ever was. Following Hettne, he finds the boundaries are shifting under the concept of new regionalism as opposed to the idea of traditional regions which used to be largely pre-determined under some political and administrative structure and process. In his concluding essay, 'Regionalism and World Order', Bjorn Hettne comes to the observation that regions are always making or unmaking, and their boundaries are shifting with changing dynamics and cohesion among the group of states involved. He argues the process of 'regionalisation' starts with the idea of 'regionness', and the more the actors involved make themselves close to regionness, the more there will be a chance of creating regional cooperation structures. Our point of focus in this study, South Asia, fails with respect to such a perspective of the region.

Another book, 'New Regionalism in the Global Political Economy: Theories and Cases', edited by Shaun Breslin, Christopher W. Hughes, Nicola Phillips and Ben Rosamond, published by

Taylor and Francis in 2002, has been very useful in forming the grounds of this work. Three essays from the edited volume need particular mention. Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott and Ben Rosamond in their essay 'Regions in Comparative Perspective' show how regional mechanisms came into prominence again in the late 1980s and 1990s with change in global order. The essay shows that in the backdrop of devastating World War II, a host of regional organisations sprang up, but most of them faded into oblivion in the next two decades except for the European initiative. While discussing different variations of regional integration processes, it highlights the renewed emphasis given on those after the forces of globalisation unleashed both positive and negative impacts on the so-called emerging markets. Financial crises of the 1990s also contributed to the rethinking and reinvigoration of such efforts, the essay argues.

Amitav Acharya, in his essay 'Regionalism and the Emerging World Order: Sovereignty, Autonomy, Identity' in the volume, discusses the evolution of regionalism in the post-World War II time and points to the changing nature of state sovereignty over the course of this evolution. Two incidents in the post-Cold War phase, he argues, the Kosovo issue and the Asian financial crisis, have put up a challenge to sovereignty in the backdrop of a globalised economy. Intrusive regionalism, Acharya believes, is taking precedence not only in Europe but also in the developing world, and this makes a new identity of regions based on shared commitment to norms such as democracy or human rights, or processes such as economic globalisation; thus, creating a post-Westphalian world order for the 21st century. In their essay, 'Theorizing the Rise of Regionness', Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum point to the structural changes that helped 'new regionalism'. They show that some macro level changes like the emergence of a multi-polar world, declining American hegemony, neoliberal economic reforms across the globe etc. have contributed to the rise of the concept of new regionalism which tends to be more adaptive, open and flexible. In the

context of our focus area, South Asia, as we will see in our next chapters, all these have had enormous impact.

In South Asian context, the book ‘Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating cooperation, institutional structures’ by Kishore C. Dash, published by Routledge under the Contemporary South Asia Series, in 2008, provides an exceptionally detailed account of the process and the hurdles in its path. The book starts with a comprehensive account of relevant theoretical positions on South Asian regionalism and then moves on to other problems, especially the domestic factors of participating nations in their approach to the regionalist project. In fact, Dash’s analysis on the ‘domestifying’ of regional issues looks more apposite in today’s South Asia, which is quite different from what it was in the 2000s. Moreover, the domestic factors include some non-state actors as well, which continue to exert their influence with varying degrees now. In this context, a reference to Mattli’s proposition of horizontal dimension of regional cooperation as against that of vertical dimension seems pertinent. In his influential essay ‘The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Regional Integration: A Concluding Note’ in ‘Comparative Regional Integration: Theoretical Perspectives’ edited by Finn Laursen, reprinted by Routledge in 2018, Mattli shows how important role the non-state actors play in the process of regionalisation which otherwise primarily focuses and depends on states and their formal authorities.

Michael Arndt’s ‘India’s Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism’, published in 2013 by Palgrave Macmillan, is one of the most reliable accounts of India’s journey since independence primarily towards the path cooperation mechanisms in the neighbourhood and also areas beyond that. The book brilliantly draws our attention to norms, ideas and values that have historically shaped India’s neighbourhood as well as larger foreign policy. It recounts the idealism of Nehruvian policy that shaped India’s policy orientation till 1961; but remained strong until the

1980s, since when India had shown a desire to adapt to the new global realities. It discusses SAARC at length and correctly finds the inherent issues that led to its failure. The volume also traces other regional organisations that have come up around this time, but none actually worked; though India apparently walked the path of pragmatism in place of moralism during this period, the author finds. To be precise, this book provides a holistic view of the policies, processes and mechanisms that India has adopted in the South Asian context. In 'Conflicting Identities: Travails of Regionalism in South Asia' edited by Rabindra Sen, Anindya Jyoti Majumdar and Bhagaban Behera, published by Routledge in 2020, three essays draw special attention in our study. Shantanu Chakrabarti in his essay, 'South Asian Regionalism in the Light of Evolving Neo-regionalism in Asia', discusses the effects of neo-regionalism in this part of the world; while Partha Pratim Basu locates 'SAARC in India's Foreign Policy Calculus'. In the essay that followed Basu's, A. Subramanyam Raju deliberates on the current developments in the context of regionalism in South Asia in 'Rethinking Regionalism in South Asia'.

The issue of regionalism in South Asia has been given adequate focus and pages have been devoted to it in various other volumes as well, discussing all those in a literature review is neither practical nor necessary. Rather we can move on to the more interesting part as to whether that path to 'regionness' has been a linear one or not. Bangladesh is the most classic example to probe this matter. In 2009, soon after assuming office, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared a three-point foreign policy agenda highlighting connectivity, India-positive initiatives and improved connections with the western world. Dhaka had indeed worked on these, and in support for open regionalism in South Asia it had cooperated with India in almost every aspect. Floating of the BBIN platform and signing of the Land Boundary Agreement, both in 2015, mark the high on this trajectory; only to be going down in the next ten years, at least comparatively, with

its ever-increasing proximity with China. This up and down has been precisely pointed by M. Humayun Kabir in his essay ‘Bangladesh and the Outside World: A Story of Exploring Convergences, Connectivity and Continuity’ in a volume edited by Sreeradha Datta, titled ‘Bangladesh on A New Journey: Moving Beyond the Regional Identity’, published by Bloomsbury India in 2024 only.

In the same volume contributor Johannes Plagemann, in the essay ‘Small States in a Multipolar Asia: The Case of Bangladesh’, draws our attention to Dhaka’s increasing dependence on Beijing over infrastructure and military procurement while maintaining warm relations with New Delhi, a fine balancing of weight between two powers in the neighbourhood. In the very next chapter, the editor herself discusses Bangladesh’s aspiration in taking a greater and more meaningful role in international and regional political developments and how tactfully Dhaka has so far played out competitive engagement efforts on part of India and China in its favour. What the editor illustrates in the essay ‘From the Bay of Bengal to the Indo-Pacific: Extra-Regional Powers Vying for Bangladesh’s Attention’ has already had its cue in the introduction where Datta describes the state’s journey defying all odds for the last 52 years. In any case, this book and particularly these chapters show how quick the level of engagement and its implied meanings can change in a regional setting, or change a regional setting. Therefore, regional initiatives should not be taken as something with a permanent character as the member-states’ changing priorities can very well change the direction or the pace of any regional platform.

An edited volume by Hidetoshi Taga and Seiichi Igarashi, ‘The New International Relations of Sub-Regionalism: Asia and Europe’, published by Routledge in 2019, helps us to move on from regional landscape to sub-regional space. Though the volume is essentially based on case studies done on sub-regions of east and southeast Asia and Europe, it quite precisely locates sub-regions

in the larger regional contexts; and the first and the concluding chapters are of special relevance here. The book traces the origins of sub-regions as cross-national spaces with economic connotation in the backdrop of new regionalism that emerged in the late 1980s. 'Subregionalism and World Order' edited by Glenn Hook and Ian Kearns is even more worth mentioning here. This volume is probably among the first ones to shed light on the term and issue of sub-regionalism long back in 1999; first published by Macmillan Press Ltd. Again, South Asia does not come under discussion in the essays that it contains; but the general theoretical positions that it develops and the processes to which it highlights come very handy in investigating the same issue in the South Asian context. One has to remember that Europe and Southeast Asia have been forerunners in conceptualising and realising such settings below the regional level; and South Asia followed suit in the late 1990s. Therefore, the analyses are quite helpful in examining our case which occurred at a later period.

Sub-regionalism in South Asia has received comparatively less focus than that of Europe or Southeast Asia and writings on this are mostly found as peripheral references in books or edited volumes treating some larger issue area. One interesting fact about South Asian politics is that it is largely personality-centric and more often than not foreign or regional policy of a South Asian state is determined by who is in power. Consequently, it can be assumed that with changes in regimes relations among these states change frequently. India's relations with Bangladesh, again, is a case in point in this respect. India's engagement with Bangladesh is very much contingent upon Awami League's position in the latter. This has been quite logically explored and explained by Shamsheer M. Chowdhury in his essay named 'Five Decades of Bangladesh-India Relations' in the edited volume titled 'Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges', published by Orient BlackSwan in 2020. In this volume edited by S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta, one of the editors

Datta herself delves into this in her essay ‘Bangladesh: Examining the Contemporary Politico-social Fabric’ though mainly focusing on contemporary issues and priorities in Bangladeshi politics. Lack of accountability stems as a result of absence of a strong opposition and can lead to weak law and order situation which can be detrimental to the interests of the minorities, Datta has discussed. South Asian states are socially and historically connected, and such atrocities against minorities in any one of them always had ramifications for the others, especially the immediate neighbours. In this way, neighbourhood integration becomes a hostage of domestic politics. Sub-regional cooperation is, therefore, a challenging proposition in South Asia; both in terms of erecting one on the ground and exploring or analysing one from an academic perspective.

Regional initiatives in South Asia have been adequately covered by academics from different disciplines; however, full scale literature on sub-regionalism in the same context is very scarce. Some very interesting articles and essays are there however, which have tried to delve into the less explored areas of the issue of sub-regionalism in South Asia. One of them is ‘BIMSTEC and BBIN—India’s highway to the east’, authored by former diplomat Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, and published in the ORF Online essay series in June, 2018. In this essay, Chakravarty points out the complete blockade on the western frontier of India due to Pakistan’s presence; and this has been further reinforced in 2021 after the Taliban’s re-ascendancy in Kabul. On the other hand, he shows there is abundant scope of economic cooperation on the eastern front; which, he believes, can later pave the way for solid political integration. He underscores the fact that with fresh efforts under the Act East Policy in the last one decade the eastward trade has crossed 50% mark of India’s overall foreign trade; and this does nothing but denote the possibilities lying in that direction. Also, to counter the Chinese projects under the BRI, an Indian response could be found in sub-regional architectures such as the BIMSTEC and BBIN, he asserts. In the same year, in August, 2018, on

the same platform, ORF Online, Samir Saran pointed to the fact that the BBIN grouping, the smaller cooperation network of the immediate neighbourhood, could make roads for larger cooperation under bigger frameworks such as the BIMSTEC. In his commentary, 'For BIMSTEC to work, fix BBIN first', he particularly highlights the drawbacks in India's handling of such initiatives and proposed a few course corrections; such as showing leadership quality, engaging the private sector in the process, etc. In a study report, titled 'The Price of Power: The Political Economy of Electricity Trade and Hydropower in Eastern South Asia', published by the Asia Foundation in June, 2018, the potential of trade in this sector has been noted. The study finds great levels of complementarity in the field of power among the states of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, provided India becomes the facilitator.

Studies like these, the ones we have discussed in the previous paragraph, are found from various sources in the form of essays, articles in newspapers and magazines, commentaries etc., but not much in number. Full length volumes on India's engagement in and with sub-regional architectures are even rarer. Therefore, ample scope remains to study the sub-regional initiatives with regard to India's neighbourhood policy; with particularly focusing on the overlapping nature of such efforts and India's handling of them.

5. Rationale and Scope of the Study

We have already observed that a region is a socially or culturally constructed space; and, as a result, due to differing understandings of space, a region is not the same for every political actor involved in that particular space. Following this assumption, some scholars argue that three types of regions can be found in the international arena; first, region as power, second, region as market, and, third, region as community. In simpler words, regions can be seen through the lens of

distribution of power, interconnectedness of economies and cultural affinity.³²In the case of South Asia, the third attribute is the most common and a possible binding factor creating a sense of region among the member states; whereas the second is sought for and the first, highly contested. India-Pakistan recurrent tension and the conspicuous presence of China denote the contestation on distribution of power; which is otherwise highly asymmetric given India's preponderance vis-à-vis the smaller neighbours. This political tussle blocks the road for economic integration, making any regional cooperation difficult.

Among the major economies of the region, India is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuel and coal for domestic consumption, whereas Bangladesh relies critically on natural gas. On the other hand, Nepal and Bhutan have enormous potential for hydropower generation. Therefore, one can find complementarity here which may open doors for cooperation. As neo-functionalists argue, a high level of interdependence in economic sectors may pave the way for future political integration. They have established their case with the example of the European Union which started out with cooperation in reciprocal and benign fields, ultimately leading to what it is now. Same can be true for South Asia, if not at regional level, at least at the sub-regional level. Neoliberal institutionalists contend that states are rational actors seeking to maximise their absolute gains in an anarchic international society; and they feel comfortable functioning with others under institutions as they believe that would restrict one from misconduct. Erecting sub-regional institutions, such as the Motor Vehicle Agreement, can alleviate fear among India's

³²Bajpai, K. (1995). Introduction: International Theory, International Society, Regional Politics, and Foreign Policy. In K. Bajpai & H. Shukul (Eds.), *Interpreting World Politics: Essays for A P Rana* (1st ed., pp. 11–42). Sage Publication.

smaller neighbours about New Delhi's intentions. In fact, in the last couple of decades, free trade regimes with India have benefitted the neighbours more than it did India.

There is no doubt that India's primary interests revolve around security with regard to its neighbourhood, especially in contrast to Chinese interests. An improvement in the economic sector necessarily improves the security condition, which is a much-desired objective, both regionally and domestically, of all of these states. India gains significantly with respect to security as a peaceful neighbourhood will enable it to engage more proactively in global affairs. From the classical realist perspective, New Delhi should focus on its military clout and may create an atmosphere where the smaller neighbours are made to comply. Nonetheless, this is highly unrealistic in the 21st century, and India does not need others to comply as well. Rather, it can very well tag the neighbours' security concerns with its own and pitch for a collective measure where the neighbours' cost of security would lessen. Neorealists prefer to see the world in terms of relative gains in place of absolute gains, and a shared idea of security of the region or sub-regions within it would only accrue gains for every participant.

Contemporary integration projects around the world reflect a complex matrix of processes at the regional and sub-regional levels. For the sake of clarity and to give direction to the present study, we need to define what we mean by a sub-region in our present context. In the very beginning, it must be said that there can be a lot of confusion as there is no clear-cut definition as such of the term. In different contexts, at different times and for different purposes, studies in international relations have taken the liberty to expand or contract the scope of the term. Commonly, sub-regions refer to geo-political spaces lying within and as subset of a larger regional space. Since there are no naturally determined regions, framing the idea of a sub-region is never totally constricted. For example, Scott Cooper and Brock Taylor, in their 2003 essay, make a distinction on the levels of

global, international, state and sub-national regions; while Fredrik Soderbaum, in his 2004 book, makes a three-level classification, world regions (extensive territorial units), sub-regions (grouping of few states) and micro-regions (within nation states).³³ Though there is a debate about the limits of a sub-region, what is widely acknowledged is that sub-regional cohesion does not come out of grand political moves, rather it is a product of local demand driven up higher. Surely, there are global and regional factors that make up the conducive environment, but without some degree of shared identity and common worldview, sub-regions are hard to crop up.³⁴ Therefore, these are not ‘natural’ geographic creation, but very much a product of natural affinity among people with proximate geography which is backed up by economic motivation or state actions. Following this perspective, the eastern part of South Asia which shares historical and cultural linkages with Southeast Asia can go up to making one or many sub-regions having different objectives.

In our case, we treat SAARC as a regional organisation as it represents the conventional idea of political South Asia. There is a possibility of considering the BIMSTEC as a regional organisation too, bearing in mind India’s inclination to re-imagine its neighbourhood on the eastern front; but it actually covers two conventional regions, and yet to mature in developing a sense of regionness over the land it is spread across. Even after recognising the fluidic character of regions and sub-regions, which are essentially politico-cultural constructs, one needs to wait for that construct to take shape in real life. Therefore, BIMSTEC is one of the most important sub-regional groupings, with a somewhat holistic mandate, that this study will try to place among the others with specific mandates such as the BBIN, the IMT Trilateral Highway Project or the Mekong-Ganga

³³Ngampramuan, S., &Ploberger, C. (2020). *Sub-regionalism and International River Basins: Evaluating the Integration of the Mekong and Danube* (1st ed.). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

³⁴Fawcett, L., &Gandois, H. (2010). Regionalism in Africa and the Middle East: Implications for EU studies. *Revue D'intégrationEuropéenne/Journal of European Integration*, 32(6), 617–636.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2010.518719>

Cooperation. Membership of these platforms is dispersed that often overlaps conventional regions; and also, due to size and mandate they do not qualify as a region. As a result, we treat these as sub-regional settings in our study. The situation is peculiar in case of the IORA though, as it stretches across four continents with 23 members, it is difficult to put it into the regional category. As this association is based on a shared identity in being littoral states of the Indian Ocean with some common maritime objectives, we take this as a sub-regional grouping too. Thus, in our present study, we will try to discuss all these six groupings in different chapters, with keeping such definitional considerations in mind.

In the previous sections, we have seen that a fertile ground is present for India's cooperation with the smaller neighbours, with some caveats which can be resolved amicably. Moreover, these smaller neighbours can benefit immensely by being connected among themselves and that too requires India's support. Therefore, if India keeps its western border out of the cooperation structures, it seems to address most issues pertaining to the other six states, and there is no bar in reimagining the region like this way either. Following this argument, this research work proposes that India's neighbourhood policy, which is largely driven by bilateralism, can attain better results with multilateralism; though it cannot be done as a whole, and under SAARC, due to intransigence of Islamabad and the unfolding situation in Kabul. Alternatively, smaller associations in the shape of sub-regional platforms, based on specific objectives and non-controversial projects, can be beneficial. This study also points out that in a hurry to exploit the promise of such sub-regional architectures, New Delhi has overstretched itself in the last couple of decades. This work suggests that to make them really work, India needs to take an incremental approach instead, starting from small scale to larger ones in a time-bound manner.

This research shall analyse India's position in South Asia first; then it moves on to discuss India's bilateral ties with South Asian neighbours, along with Afghanistan and Myanmar, due to their inseparable nature from the region's fate. After that, it will discuss regionalism under SAARC, and from there on it will take note of the sub-regional groupings starting from the BIMSTEC and delving deep into other four, the MGC, the IORA, the BBIN and the IMTT Highway. The study seeks to establish the overlapping nature of these initiatives, and to highlight how that is detrimental to India's interests. It wraps up by proposing some ways and means which can make India's engagement in these sub-regional architectures more productive in coming times.

6. Research methodology

This research is qualitative in nature; and it is based on both primary and secondary sources. As the primary sources, this research has studied the following items:

- policy documents published by the governments,
- press releases/ press notes, or briefings by ministers/ government officials, and
- speeches by the government representatives in various international platforms.

In addition to that, as the secondary sources, the following items have been examined:

- books,
- articles published in journals/ news magazines,
- editorials/ commentaries published in newspapers,
- newspaper/ news magazine reports, and
- audio-visual clips aired on news channels.

The sources have been assembled keeping two indicators in mind; first, it has to be covering sub-regionalism in South Asia or some related aspect of it, and second, the timeframe for that coverage (generally) starts from 1991. The timeframe is chosen by the logic that the post-Cold War era which ushered in a new world order had a deep impact on cooperation initiatives in South Asia; though, some liberty has been taken in some necessary cases. Being descriptive in nature, the study mainly banks on the method of discourse analysis in probing the gathered texts, while relying on the historical analytical method a few times.

A good amount of current data on the regional and sub-regional efforts or platforms is available with the government agencies; as well as with many non-government, non-profit organisations working on the field. Moreover, there's a good amount of coverage on these developments in the print, the electronic and the web media. This study has used the method of content analysis, at times, to examine these secondary sources, and it has then tried to compare the findings with that of the primary sources.

Some interactions have been carried out with researchers working in the same domain and with journalists as well, who cover South Asian affairs in their respective media outlets. Visits to libraries have been frequently done; including the National Library of Kolkata, and Digital Library of Jadavpur University.

7. Chapter Model

This study contains seven main, discussion chapters dealing with different parts of the research, preceded by this introduction and followed by a conclusion. The contents of the seven chapters are discussed in brief here.

- *Chapter 1: India in South Asia:* This chapter tries to locate India in the South Asian landscape, more politically than geographically. It also establishes the centrality that India enjoys in this region, and examines how that position is perceived by the neighbours.
- *Chapter 2: India's relations with South Asian Neighbours (1):* This chapter deals with bilateral relations with four South Asian neighbours; viz. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The nature of India's relations with these neighbours varies greatly and over time they have evolved due to both internal and external factors; like the partition, the end of the Cold War, the American War on Terror on Afghan soil, or the internal political conflicts in these states, to name a few. These bilateral ties have been contextualised in India's larger neighbourhood policy framework and in parallel to multilateral mechanisms through the course of the chapter.
- *Chapter 3: India's relations with South Asian Neighbours (2):* Due to the special nature of relations that India shares with Nepal and Bhutan, these two Himalayan neighbours have been discussed separately. Along with the uniqueness of India's ties with these states and recent progress in that path, their role in Indian initiatives in the neighbourhood have also been highlighted in this chapter.
- *Chapter 4: India's ties with Afghanistan and Myanmar:* The two states discussed here are not, technically speaking, part of South Asia, but very important neighbours of India located on the fringes of the region, and whose fate and that of South Asia's are very much intertwined. India's neighbourhood policy and its efforts in the regional or sub-regional cooperation cannot be analysed without taking Afghanistan and Myanmar into the equation.
- *Chapter 5: Regionalism in South Asia: The Rise and Decline of SAARC:* First attempt to South Asian integration was done in the form of SAARC forty years back, in 1985. Despite starting

with high hopes, it has been able to produce very little results and remained most of its lifetime muted. This chapter traces the emergence, evolution, and causes of limited success of SAARC as a regional grouping.

- *Chapter 6: India in Sub-regional Organisations: the BIMSTEC, the MGC, and the IORA:* This chapter delves into three sub-regional mechanisms erected on India's behest (along with its partner countries like Thailand or South Africa though) during the late 1990s, as a result of New Delhi's growing interest in Southeast Asia, and also as a response to SAARC's ineffectiveness. These groupings have somewhat formal structures and specific mandates in the form of their charters. This chapter tries to locate them in India's neighbourhood policy framework and explores the development on these platforms made so far.
- *Chapter 7: India in Sub-regional Initiatives: BBIN and IMTT Highway:* Following cue from the last chapter, this too contextualises and assesses the two sub-regional initiatives, BBIN and the IMTT Highway, in India's neighbourhood policy. The difference between these two and the three that have been discussed in the previous chapter lies in their structure and operational style, which are informal in case of the BBIN or the IMTT Highway, and for that these two call for focus distinctly.

At the end of the thesis, the conclusion sums up the findings from these seven discussion chapters and tests the hypothesis of this study.

Chapter 1

India in South Asian Geo-political Space

1.1 Introduction

India is generally considered to be the most dominant state in South Asia; given its geographical expansion, economic depth, political stability, military might, and cultural influence upon the neighbours—no one can deny its centrality in the region. Its sheer size, in all the aspects mentioned above, when compared to other states in this political space, makes India's presence felt in any affair related to the region; even if it is not a direct party to that particular development. This centrality does not come with a natural leadership role though, as leadership is a psychological construct, and therefore, it is earned or given by others than the aspirant itself. India's enormity is surely acknowledged by the neighbours, but that does not necessarily mean they are willing to band together behind it for everything that happens to them or in the region as such. In fact, the size of India, sometimes, works for disadvantage rather than accruing benefits for it. This chapter tries to locate India, in such a context, in South Asian regional space.

A large volume of literature is available on South Asia and its politics, economics, culture and security issues, and some of them surely highlight India's position in it. Having said that, it is necessary to start this discussion on that particular point only, keeping a focus on India's engagement with the neighbours both at bilateral and multilateral plains; as this research is particularly interested in investigating India's neighbourhood policy and the role of sub-regional architectures, which had come up in the last couple of decades in the vicinity, in it.

Following this line of thought, this chapter shall try to look into some of those existing literature which have been successful in establishing India's pivotal standing in the region; and it also tries to outline the major challenges to India's regional influence. The chapter starts with providing a general idea on South Asia, as to delve deeper into the subject, it is first necessary to have a clear idea about the region concerned. Pointing out the core issues of South Asian politics, the chapter then moves on to analyse India's policy options in the neighbourhood at present. As any discussion on South Asia without a reference to China remains incomplete, this chapter also tries to touch upon the issue of competitive engagement of the two large states, India and China, in their South Asian neighbourhood.

PART I: A Brief Profile of South Asia

1.2 General Overview

South Asia is located in the southern part of the Asian continent. It is encircled by the Indian Ocean to the south, the Arabian Sea to the south-west, and the Bay of Bengal to the south-east. In the north, it is surrounded by three great mountain ranges, namely the Himalayas, the Karakoram and the Hindukush, from east to west. South Asia is home to seven countries, which are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In some analyses, Afghanistan is also considered to be a part of the region; especially after its inclusion to the regional grouping of SAARC in 2007. Historically, the Afghan state and society had more proximity and linkages with Central Asia than with South Asia though. Moreover, the present day South Asian states were directly or indirectly under the British colonial control for almost two centuries and for that they have much in common in their political or administrative mechanisms; which differs heavily in case of Afghanistan. Therefore, to maintain precision in our study, we will limit ourselves to these

seven countries only while discussing and referring to South Asia. Afghanistan and Myanmar are, however, deeply intertwined with developments in South Asia, and vice versa; and they have been given adequate space in this research for this factor—while as the reasons stated above, they have been discussed separately but within the context of this research.

South Asia is home to about 2 billion people and it is not only the most populous region in the world, but also the most densely populated.¹ This region is known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse languages, religions, and traditions. The major religions practised in South Asia include Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity; but there are also a large number of people practising age-old, traditional belief systems.

The region is characterised by a wide range of landscapes, from the high-altitude mountain ranges in the north to the fertile river plains of three great river systems of the Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. South Asia is also known for its tropical forests, coastal areas, and diverse wildlife. Economically, South Asia is a mix of developing and emerging economies where India is the biggest player followed by Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is a wide spectrum of healthy per capita income states like the Maldives to quite poor ones like Nepal and Bhutan. The main source of income is still agriculture in most parts across the region with some booming centres of industrial production. Of late, this region is depending quite heavily on service sectors like tourism or information technology (IT), besides the old school manufacturing units.

Like any other region in the world, South Asia also faces challenges like poverty, political conflicts, environmental issues, and social inequality. Issues such as terrorism, religious tensions,

¹*Population of Southern Asia (2024) - Worldometer.* (2024, July 2). Worldometer. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-asia-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Southern,among%20subregions%20ranked%20by%20Population.>

and territorial disputes have also tested the stability of the region time and again. The great diversity of the region brings great differences which pose challenges to any regional integration effort as well. Overall, it is a dynamic and diverse region with a rich cultural heritage, and significant geopolitical importance in world politics, housing two nuclear states.

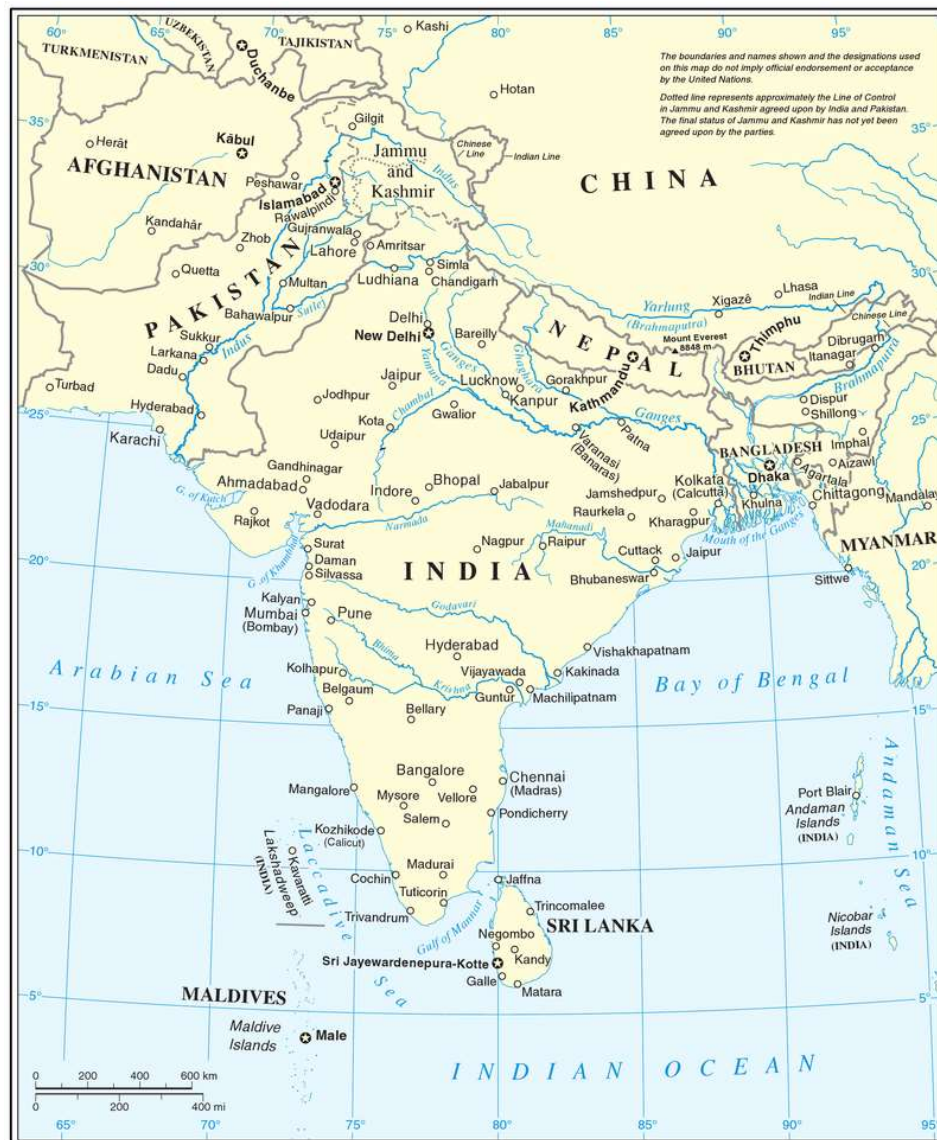


Figure 1: Political map of South Asia.
Source: UN archive

1.3 South Asia: Demography

South Asia is the most populous region in the world, with a population a little above 2 billion people.² It is also the most congested region of the world. It is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures. The population of South Asia is not evenly distributed across the sub-regions. India is the most populous country, with about 1.4 billion people, accounting for the majority of the population in South Asia. Other countries with significant populations include Pakistan and Bangladesh, contributing 235 million and 171 million respectively.³ South Asia has experienced rapid urbanisation in recent decades, especially after the liberalisation of South Asian economies starting from the early 1990s. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Karachi, and Dhaka are among the most populous urban centres in the world.⁴

South Asian countries are vastly different in size. For example, the Maldives' or Bhutan's population is totally incomparable to that of India. Three of the region's seven countries (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) account for 95% of the total regional population; with India alone accounting for roughly three-quarters of it. South Asian countries greatly differ in terms of population density too, which spans from about 1301 residents per square kilometre in Bangladesh and 1738 in Maldives to only 20 inhabitants per square kilometre on an average in Bhutan as in 2021.⁵ South Asian countries have an extremely diversified population breakdown by religion. The vast majority of people in Bangladesh and Pakistan are Muslims. According to the 2017

²Ibid.

³Population, Total- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

⁴World City Populations 2023. (2024). World Population Review. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities>

⁵Population Density (Per sq. km of land area)- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=8S>

census, more or less 96.5% Pakistanis belong to different sects of Islam.⁶ Bangladesh has a 91% Muslim and 8% Hindu population according to the latest census.⁷ Nepal's population is more than 81% Hindu, with Buddhism, the second most important faith, accounting for slightly over 8% of the overall population.⁸ In India also, Hinduism is the majority religion (79.8%) as per the 2011 census. Many other religions exist in India, although with the exception of Islam (14.2% of the population), they are in the quite minority (Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Christians compose about 6% put together).⁹

South Asia faces the same demographic issues as other developing countries dealing with rapid population growth. These are the difficulties of educating, housing, caring for, and employing a rapidly rising population. These countries have to battle poverty while ensuring that the economic growth they so need to enhance their people's lives do not cause major environmental damage. South Asian populations are extremely vulnerable, both economically (particularly children who begin working at a young age) and environmentally; and this huge population has several consequences for these states.¹⁰ First, South Asia's fast population expansion has slowed down its economic growth, increased the international trade imbalance, and exacerbated poverty. Second, the region's educational system has become overburdened due to the same reason. Third, young

⁶2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan. (2023, December 7). United States Department of State. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

⁷2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bangladesh. (2023, December 7). United States Department of State. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>

⁸Pradhan, S. B. (2023, June 4). Nepal's 81.19 per cent population is Hindu even as followers of Hinduism, Buddhism decline and Islam, Christians increase. *ThePrint*. <https://theprint.in/world/nepals-81-19-per-cent-population-is-hindu-even-as-followers-of-hinduism-buddhism-decline-and-islam-christians-increase/1611622/>

⁹Schaeffer, K. (2021, September 21). *Key findings about the religious composition of India*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>

¹⁰Véron, J. (2008). La démographie de l'Asie du Sud des années 1950 aux années 2000. *Population*, Vol. 63(1), 9–92. <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.801.0009>

labour lacks skills, training, and job experience, and as a result, productivity is not reaching its full potential. Consequently, profits, investment capability, and relative wages are all dropping. Oversupply of labour along with unemployment and poverty have become increasingly worrisome. Furthermore, rapid population growth has increased the strain on the supply chain of food items and negatively impacted general public nutrition.¹¹

The languages spoken in South Asia are incredibly diverse. Among the major languages are Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi, Nepali and Sinhala. All the countries of this region have their official language/s, which are spoken widely along with a large number of other regional languages. There are two major linguistic families in South Asia. Northern and western India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, as well as southern and western Sri Lanka, are dominated by Indo-Iranian languages. Dravidian languages are most prevalent in southern India, as well as northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Other South Asian languages include those of the Tibeto-Burman family (mainly in the north-east and mountainous areas) and tribal languages of central and southern India.¹²

Internal and international migration has a long history in South Asia. Internal migration is common and takes place when people move from rural to urban areas in search for better economic choices. International migration is also scaling upward in the region, with major emigration from countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to other regions of the world, especially to the west and the Middle East, in search of better employment prospects, and also education. Here one must not forget that such a vivid demographic profile coupled with numerous mother tongues have quite

¹¹Gu, J. (1983, July 29). *The Population and Economic Problems of South Asia*. PubMed. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12313019/>

¹²*Languages of South Asia*. (n.d.). Center for South Asia Outreach. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://southasiaoutreach.wisc.edu/languages/>

often been a source of political conflicts across the region and been a roadblock in the path of imagining and developing a South Asian regional identity.

1.4 South Asia: Cultural Diversity

South Asia is probably the world's most diversified and pluralistic cultural and religious region.

Rasheeduddin Khan, a pioneering federalist, stated prophetically,

“India is a classic plural society and a massive federal polity. That indeed is its most distinctive characteristic, a hallmark of its unique personality. India’s plural-federal character is apparent in practically every major aspect of its collective life, be it social systems, economic formations, cultural-patterns; or language-dialect groupings, religious communities, castes, sub-castes and sects...and in rich tapestry of folklore, folk dance, music, cuisine, crafts and artefacts of life.”¹³

Interestingly, what Khan writes about India is true for many, if not all, of the region's countries, albeit to varied degrees. South Asia is the origin and significant centre of practice for many faiths. It is home to a variety of religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity. Each religion has its own set of beliefs, rituals, and practices that have profoundly affected the region's culture, art, architecture, and way of life; and in the process they have been influenced and changed too. Such variety of the region is the consequence of strong links between South Asia and Central, West, East, and Southeast Asia, as well as European traders and colonisers. South Asia is inhabited by numerous ethnic groups, including but not limited to Indo-Aryans, Dravidians, and aboriginal Indians. Bengalis, Punjabis, Gujaratis, Tamils, Sindhis, Pashtuns, Nepalis etc. are the most populous groups of people but there are many more with considerably

¹³Khan, R. (1992). *Federal India: A Design for Change* (1st ed.). Vikas Publishing House.

large numbers. As noted earlier, South Asia is also linguistically diverse. In addition to the major and official languages, numerous local and indigenous languages are spoken throughout the region. For example, the Indian constitution recognises 22 languages as official languages and more than 96% of Indians now speak in any one of those, but there are other 99 languages which are spoken widely (given the population of India, even a little percentage figure represents a large group of people!), though not listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Outside of this official count, the number of mother tongues spoken across the length of the country goes up to thousands.¹⁴ When more states of the region are considered, the number of official and unrecognised/ local languages grows even more. Bangladesh is the only monolingual country of South Asia where more than 98% of its population speaks Bengali. It is said that the way people speak changes every 100 KM in South Asia.

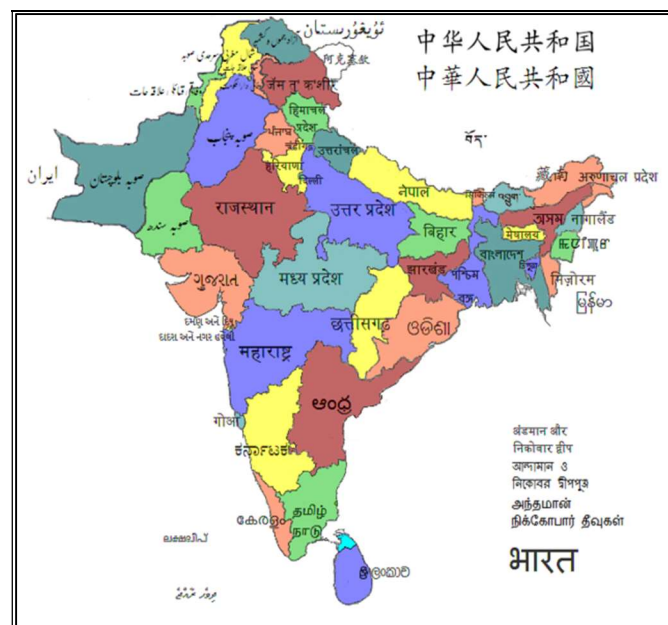


Figure 2: Linguistic diversity of South Asia.
Source: Emory University

¹⁴Press Trust of India. (2018, July 1). More than 19,500 mother tongues spoken in India: Census. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/more-than-19500-mother-tongues-spoken-in-india-census-5241056/>

South Asia is well-known for its dazzling and colourful festivities that take place throughout the year. Festivals like as Diwali, Holi, Eid, Navratri, Pongal, Durga Puja, Buddha Purnima, Nanak Jayanti, Baisakhi etc. are widely celebrated in different parts of the region and among various communities, presenting a wide range of cultural customs, music, dance, and food. The region is well-known for its performing arts traditions which are immensely rich in heritage. Classical dance styles of India such as Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and traditional music genres such as Hindustani classical of the north and Carnatic music of the south are highly regarded worldwide.

The region's diversity and plurality have undoubtedly put considerable strains on the states and required robustness in addressing various forms of autonomy calls, as a result of which federalism and other forms of power-sharing mechanisms have emerged. Furthermore, in states like India, federalism had to be adapted to the unique needs of varied territorial autonomy demands, resulting in much asymmetry in the political systems (example of the Bodoland for instance). However, countries which were unable to appropriately manage or accommodate their people's territorial aspirations, such as Pakistan or Sri Lanka, had to experience the agonising process of secession or disastrous long-drawn civil conflicts, respectively.

Cultural pluralism in South Asian countries, represented in languages, religions, and ethnicities, appeared to be more complex than its geographical diversity. States have attempted to meet the linguistic aspirations of various people through twin strategies of granting constitutional status or state recognition to major languages, and/ or by establishing separate territorial units on a linguistic basis to create an exclusive geographical space for people speaking a particular language. This approach has proven to be effective in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, among others. However, the most egregious example of mismanagement of linguistic pluralism in South Asia came from Pakistan, whose brutal attempts to politically marginalise and suppress the Bengali-

speaking people in East Pakistan eventually resulted in a full-fledged civil war that ended with the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent state.¹⁵ Ethnic diversity, in practically all countries, has motivated people to strive and obtain not only political recognition, but also to engage in competitive power play with other ethnic groups, resulting in confrontations between different ethnic groups, which sometimes went violent.

1.5 South Asia: Economy

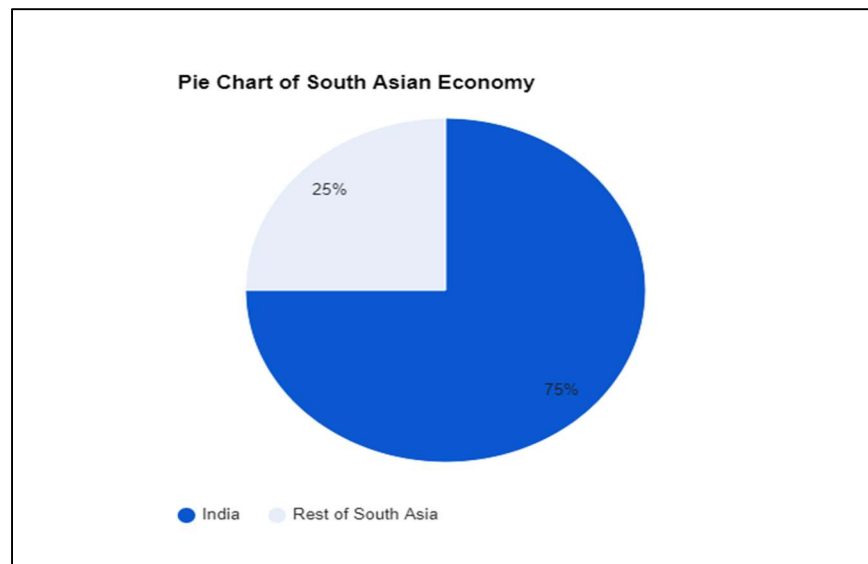
In recent years, most of South Asia has experienced significant economic growth. Between 2010 and 2018, its economy grew at a 6.7 percent annual rate, which was twice as fast as the global average of 3 percent. The majority of this expansion has come from India, where urbanisation and a thriving tech industry have made the country the world's fastest-growing sizable economy. Bangladesh has established domestic businesses such as textile manufacturing in order to attain similar kind of growth. Despite this economic advance in some parts, South Asia, in general, remains impoverished and unequal, with inadequate infrastructure, and skilled young men migrating due to high unemployment.¹⁶

India is the region's largest and most important economy, accounting for more than 75% of its GDP. India's economy, which has already surpassed that of the United Kingdom, is expanding. It presently ranks fifth in the world, and HSBC Bank predicts that India's economy will be the world's third largest by 2030. India's per capita income has tripled since the 1990s, when it joined the World Trade Organization and undertook economic reforms that overturned decades of trade

¹⁵Zakaria, A. (2019, December 16). Remembering the war of 1971 in East Pakistan. *Opinions | Al Jazeera*. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/16/remembering-the-war-of-1971-in-east-pakistan>

¹⁶*South & Central Asia*. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>

related restrictions. Its life expectancy and literacy rates have also significantly increased since then. The ascent of India in the global economy, the establishment of high-tech centres, and the emergence of a class of savvy entrepreneurs tell only one side of the story though. Poverty and inequality prevail across the country, infrastructure is still deficient, and the country lags behind world averages in health, nutrition, and educational performance.¹⁷



Bangladesh got independence from Pakistan in 1971 and has since grown substantially. The country has experienced fast economic expansion, primarily as a top manufacturer of textile items. In addition to the garments sector, this is also attributable to the significant volume of remittances it receives from West Asia and the Gulf states. Bhutan's water resources provide significant untapped potential for hydropower development. Currently a large portion of its excess hydropower is sold to neighbouring India, thus generating most of the government revenues, along with a thriving tourism sector. The Maldives' GDP growth is mostly driven by high-end tourism, particularly from Europe, China, and India. As a result, it is typically vulnerable to external

¹⁷Ibid.

economic shocks during times of distress. Nepal has a long history of agrarian economy, particularly in rice production. With rising power output and robust consumer demand, the industrial sector in Nepal too is now progressing; though it is yet to fully recover from the long-term effects of the 2015 earthquake. Pakistan's growth is mostly driven by domestic private and public consumption. Despite the benefits of foreign investment (mainly from China) inflow and healthy exports, it is going through an emergency-like situation in the economy, mainly due to a series of bad political decisions and the military establishment's regular interference in economic policies. Despite the end of a decades-long civil war, Sri Lanka is still vulnerable to political tensions and resultant economic uncertainty. It has also become a victim of carrying the image of a sovereign defaulter which is adversely impacting in bringing in fresh investments.¹⁸

Trade among South Asian countries accounts for less than 5% of total trade in the region. In other words, South Asian countries trade with countries outside the region far more comfortably and in much larger volume than they trade with their immediate neighbours. This is primarily owing to Pakistan's denial in truly participating in a free trade zone (FTA) agreement in the region due to suspicions about India's motive. Lower tariffs and fewer restrictions at border crossings might boost India-Pakistan commerce from current USD 3 billion to an estimated USD 30 billion, but such reforms would necessitate increased collaboration between the two governments, which seems unlikely anytime soon. Political manoeuvring and uncertainty are two key factors in South Asia for its relatively slow economic progress as a region.¹⁹

¹⁸*Where We Work: South Asia*. (n.d.). World Bank. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/where-we-work>

¹⁹*South & Central Asia*. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>

Regional cooperation generally starts on the back of economic integration as economic growth thus achieved benefits all the participants. Economy works as the glue for initial collaborations which might later be extended to other areas. South Asia lacked in this front, mainly due to Islamabad's continuous negative approach to any such efforts, suspecting Indian motive of expanding its strategic influence by economic tools. As a result, South Asia is the most poorly connected economic region in the world, consequently making political cooperation on a regional scale even more difficult; though there seems to be enough scope for such cooperation due to these states' complementarity in economies and similarity in other areas needing immediate attention such as poverty alleviation or education. Having such a scenario in the neighbourhood, since the 1990s, India has consistently tried to explore the possibilities of political cooperation on the back of economic interests on a sub-regional basis.

1.6 South Asia: Politics

The world's largest democracy, India, is located in South Asia. In the most recent national elections (in 2024), about 638 million people voted in India. With a huge electorate of about 969 million people, about 66% of the voters turned out to vote.²⁰ However, size does not necessarily signify the excellence in case of democracies and large democracies may not always be the healthy ones. Corruption and a rise in religious nationalism in India are threatening the country's democratic and secular fabric as enshrined in its Constitution. Pakistan, on the other hand, the second largest

²⁰BBC News. (2024, June 4). *India elections 2024: When were they, who could vote and why do they matter?* BBC. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68678594>

²¹Chakrabarty, S. (2024, June 7). 65.79% turnout in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, says Election Commission. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/india-general-election-2024-6579-turnout-in-2024-lok-sabha-polls-says-election-commission/article68259360.ece>

supposedly democratic country, strives to balance power between elected civilian governments and the military and intelligence agencies. Several South Asian states have seen a surge of democracy in the twenty-first century. Bhutan and Nepal, both erstwhile kingdoms controlled by absolute monarchs, have introduced democratic institutions and held elections in the last two decades. Similarly, the Maldives had its first competitive elections in 2008, after thirty years of autocratic rule under Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, during which torture and arbitrary detention of dissenters were quite widespread. The Maldives' constitution still requires its inhabitants to be Muslims to be citizens, and religious minorities are barred from holding political office.

In Bangladesh, the shadow of one-party rule under the Awami League is looming large. There have been a number of incidents of journalists being put into trial, intellectual expressions curbed and dissents being silenced by various allurements, as reported by the media—all as the party won recent elections with more than 80% of the vote (while the main Opposition had boycotted the elections accusing electoral malpractice by the government). In Sri Lanka too, democracy has gone through many ups and downs in the last three decades; and more recently it has shown a bias towards family rule of the Rajapaksas, denting its democratic credentials. Very recently the ruling family has been ousted for financial mismanagement of the state which made the country a sovereign defaulter; still public sympathy remains intact with them to a major extent due to their ‘success’ in suppressing the Tamil rebellion in the north.²²

India now has close to a billion eligible voters, more than the numbers summed together of the next three large democracies in the world. In comparison to the United States, the apparently strongest and most deep-rooted democracy, which has just two parties in the Congress and a few

²²*South & Central Asia*. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>

independent lawmakers, India has 41 parties with at least one seat in the lower house of the Parliament along with 7 independent lawmakers in the just concluded Lok Sabha elections.²³ As of March, 2024, according to the Election Commission of India, there are 6 national parties, 27 state parties and a whopping 2764 registered unrecognised political parties (RUPP).²⁴²⁵²⁶ Most Indians believe they are content with their democracy and party system, but also maintain it is not without flaws. Although elections are normally well-organised, free, and fair, and held on time, politicians are regularly accused of bribery and corruption. Almost half of India's parliamentarians elected in 2019 faced criminal prosecution and some of them are of serious nature. The vast number of parties in India's parliament more often than not slows down the decision-making process, but they are also the mouthpiece of people belonging to diverse class, caste, region, religion and cultures or ethnic identities apart from different political ideologies.²⁷

People in Pakistan apparently elect politicians to form governments, but the country's military has the actual control. The military's intelligence arm, known as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), wields extensive power; it has, allegedly, repeatedly manipulated elections and orchestrated coups

²³*General Election to Parliamentary Constituencies: Trends & Results June-2024*. (2024, June 5). Election Commission of India. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://results.eci.gov.in/PeResultGenJune2024/index.htm>

²⁴List of National Political Parties. (2024). In *Election Commission of India*. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYNJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZ15qMtjV1qgjFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT4%2B2%2BvJW%2BYW5YnFYBIJXuRylgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

²⁵List of State Parties. (2024). In *Election Commission of India*. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYNJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZ15qMtjV1qgjFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT4%2BEJecVc93B3LTxyyJga%2BpSgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

²⁶List of RUPPs, Delisted and Inactive RUPPs. (2024). In *Election Commission of India*. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYNJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZ15qMtjV1qgjFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT49qSWXyEJcR%2FnGOc%2B3Sx%2B2TgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

²⁷*South & Central Asia*. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>

under the pretext of preserving the country's national interests. In turn, this has reduced public trust in democratic institutions, in addition to large-scale corruption and regular political scandals. Therefore, not so surprisingly, Pakistan witnessed its first transfer of power between two civilian leaders only in 2013, after seven decades of independence.²⁸

The South Asian region has earned the credit in electing the world's first female Head of State, in Sri Lanka in the 1960s. However, it has failed in producing women leaders of comparable calibre and stature to those exemplified by Sirimavo Bandaranaike or Indira Gandhi; even keeping the names of Benazir Bhutto or Sheikh Hasina in mind. Women occupy less than 8 percent of senior positions within policy making circles in the region. Although many countries have taken steps in ensuring gender balance in representative institutions, they have not yet reached the desired levels. Politics in the South Asian region is commonly perceived as being characterised by unethical practices and it is commonly acknowledged as a male-dominated sphere. Power dynamics contribute to the amplification of various manifestations of violence, both in the context of electoral processes and in the pursuit of political party posts, leaving the women at the periphery as a result.²⁹

Around the onset of the twenty-first century, South Asia witnessed a widespread presence of anti-state rebellions within its political space. India faced significant challenges from both separatist and revolutionary insurgencies in different parts. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), commonly referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, emerged rapidly and posed a formidable threat to the Pakistani security establishment which had been complacent to it so far. In Nepal, Maoist insurgents

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Nepali, R. K. (2009). Democracy in South Asia. In *www.idea.int*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/the-role-of-the-european-union-in-democracy-building/eu-democracy-building-discussion-paper-5.pdf>

mobilised against the government, while the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the ‘Tamil Tigers’, established a *de facto* state in northern Sri Lanka centred around Jaffna. Apprehensions were seen in Bangladesh too with regard to rise in religious fundamentalist elements. But making all predictions of possible state failure wrong, the state's influence has rather significantly increased. The majority of the anti-state revolts that erupted throughout the region have been effectively either suppressed or brought under control.³⁰

Governments have become able to impose greater control over previously contested territories, deployed new-age hi-tech surveillance technologies for monitoring and early warnings, and, in certain circumstances, combined political authority of the ruling party with state's coercive power. New kinds of state and non-state coercion, particularly localised mob and vigilante violence, have grown more politically visible, frequently tied to, rather than aimed against, the state and the ruling parties. This has taken the shape of a political trend in India and Bangladesh particularly. Nevertheless, major conflicts continue to wreak havoc on people, but sporadically now. In any estimate, though, the level of political violence in much of the region at present is markedly different and low from what it was in the early 2000s.³¹

1.7 South Asia: A Shared Political History

As modern legal entities, the states of South Asia are quite young. After partition, independent India and Pakistan came into existence on 15th and 14th of August, 1947, respectively. Breaking away from Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged in 1971. Sri Lanka secured its independence from

³⁰Staniland, P. (2020, September 3). *Political Violence in South Asia: The Triumph of the State?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/political-violence-in-south-asia-triumph-of-state-pub-82641>

³¹Ibid.

British rule in 1948, while it took the Maldives to wait until 1965. The Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan were never formally colonised by the British, though they exerted extensive control through their political agents at the courts in Kathmandu and Thimphu; therefore, independence in adjacent India, brought about a new time in those countries too. Starting with the domination of companies backed by the British government in the 18th century, practically the whole region came under direct British rule in the middle of the 19th century. This age of colonialism is the root of many disputes in today's South Asia, and it also sets the background of current relations among these states. As a result of complex and interconnected history spanning over millennia, further messed up by the British, South Asia does not have a single narrative of history accepted by all these modern states.

Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, the British government gradually extended its control over the *de facto* colony previously held by the East India Company. By 1900, the British Empire had established direct governance over 50% of the Indian subcontinent, while exerting indirect control over the remaining portion, which consisted of over 500 princely states. The possibility of independence emerged during the second quarter of the 20th century as a result of the British reallocating its resources for participation in the two world wars in twenty years. While the majority of Indian leaders advocated for independence as it were, a minority faction called the Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, expressed concerns about the potential vulnerability of Muslims as a minority in an independent, democratic India with a Hindu majority. They advocated with the British for a separate homeland for Muslims of the

subcontinent, named as Pakistan. The independence of the subcontinent, thus, was accompanied by the Partition of India, a profoundly distressing phase in the history of the region.³²

Due to India's dominant position in the South Asian region, there is a tendency to mistakenly conflate the history of India with that of South Asia. The extended duration of colonial rule in the near past, spanning almost two centuries, contributes more to this state of confusion. Foreign powers exerted control over South Asia from India for the purpose of safeguarding their security as well as business interests. This resulted in India becoming a focal point for their domination in the region. However, it is important to acknowledge that other countries have distinct histories, which, while closely linked to India and possibly influenced by India, are nevertheless separate. Although South Asian history and the history of India share historical connections and overlaps, they are not completely analogous.

India, as the largest and most populous country in South Asia, had a significant impact on the history and culture of the region. The ancient civilisations, middle age empires and kingdoms of (geographically speaking) present-day India have significantly influenced the entire subcontinent. However, it is important to admit in the same breath that South Asia consists of multiple nations, each with its own unique history, languages, religions, and cultural traditions. With distinct historical backgrounds, political advancements, and varying levels of engagement with neighbouring states and the region at large, each one's trajectory is different from the other. Pakistan and Bangladesh have their own national history which defines their national identity; and quite naturally those are different from that of India, although the larger part of history is common among the three. As Pakistan is a product of partition of British India, it has a different

³²*South and Central Asia | Modern history*. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia/modern-history#pakistan-is-born-as-british-exit-subcontinent>

interpretation about the independence movement and the path to freedom than what we are taught in India; in the same way, Bangladesh treats its history differently, decoupling it from the Pakistani narrative. Sri Lanka possesses a typical historical background characterised by the presence of ancient kingdoms and the influence of colonial powers. Nepal and Bhutan have national history that dates back to ancient times, and till the time of colonial era, though very much interconnected with India, they were independent of India nonetheless. Therefore, to comprehend the intricacies of South Asian history, it is crucial to admit the diverse narratives and experiences of its constituent states; and, it must be noted, as history has shown, that any regional cooperation effort can be held hostage to such differing narratives.

1.8 Partition and Its Role in South Asian History

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was influenced by multiple factors and historical circumstances. One significant factor was the escalating communal tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities in British India. The All India Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, played a significant role in promoting the idea of establishing a separate Muslim state to meet the aspirations of South Asian Muslims. The two-nation theory, advocated by scholar and community leader Muhammad Iqbal and later adopted by Jinnah, posited that Hindus and Muslims were distinct nations characterised by separate religious, cultural, and political identities. The theory served as the foundation for the aspiration of establishing an independent Muslim state in the subcontinent. The British colonial rulers had a significant role in the partition as well. First the Company and later the Raj employed a strategy known as 'divide and rule', leveraging the religious and communal differences between Hindus and Muslims as a means to retain power in India. Since 1909, the British had started granting India some degree of

autonomy, at least on paper; however, they had also implemented a policy of separate electorates based on communal identity, which allowed religious communities to elect their own representatives. This policy contributed to deepening of the existing communal fissure. Efforts to establish a constitutional framework that could accommodate the interests of both the Indian National Congress, which represented the Hindu, Sikh, and a significant portion of the Muslim population, and the All India Muslim League, which represented a segment of the Muslim community, ultimately proved unsuccessful. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 sought to establish a united and federal India. However, the plan failed due to disagreements regarding power-sharing and the representation of religious communities.

Following World War II, Britain lacked the necessary resources to maintain control over its most prized imperial asset, resulting in a disorderly, hurried, and poorly executed withdrawal from India. From the perspective of the colonisers who were withdrawing, it can be argued that the endeavour was somewhat successful. Despite a history of violent revolts and brutal suppressions all along the British rule in India, the British Army was able to withdraw from the country with minimal resistance and loss, suffering only seven casualties. The intensity of the ensuing violence was shocking and hitherto unforeseen though. One of the largest migrations in human history occurred when millions of Muslims migrated to West and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), while millions of Hindus and Sikhs walked in the opposite direction; and a large number of individuals could not make it to their intended destination ever.

This polarisation between Hindus and Muslims emerged within a surprising short span of time in the twentieth century. By the 1940s, it had become so wide that a considerable number of people from both religious communities had started believing that peaceful coexistence between them was no longer possible. In the subcontinent, long-standing inter-community bond and exchange

collapsed, and a sudden and unprecedented outbreak of sectarian violence was seen. Hindus and Sikhs aligned against Muslims and vice versa, resulting in mass scale bloodshed that was neither expected nor imaginable even a couple of decades ago. In the bordering provinces of Punjab and Bengal, there was a particularly high level of violence, including massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and brutal sexual assaults.³³

Many contemporary writers credibly blame the British colonial rule for the gradual erosion of trust and shared traditions lasting for almost a millennium. Alex von Tunzelmann observes in her appealing book ‘Indian Summer’:

“The British started to define ‘communities’ based on religious identity and attach political representation to them, many Indians stopped accepting the diversity of their own thoughts and began to ask themselves in which of the boxes they belonged.”³⁴

In a similar tone, British scholar Yasmin Khan, in her acclaimed history ‘The Great Partition’ judges the partition as:

“[Partition] stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different—and unknowable—paths.”³⁵

Communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims escalated amidst the disorder caused by the Second World War. In 1942, the Japanese occupation of Singapore and Rangoon (Yangon), along with their swift advancement through Burma (present-day Myanmar) towards India, prompted the Congress Party to initiate the Quit India Movement. This campaign of civil disobedience led to the arrest of all senior Congress leaders across the country, including Gandhi and Nehru. While these

³³Dalrymple, W. (2015, June 22). The bloody legacy of Indian partition. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

³⁴Von Tunzelmann, A. (2012). *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire*. Simon and Schuster.

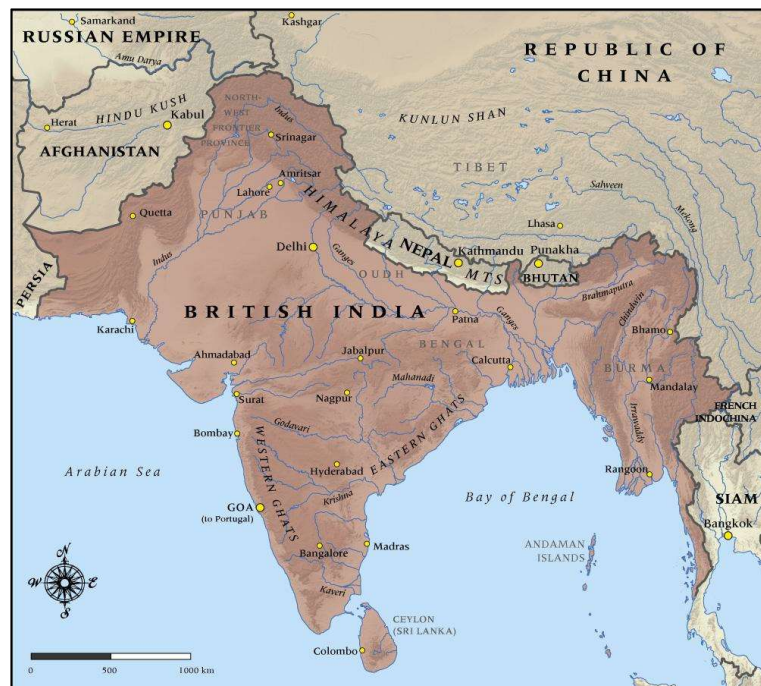
³⁵Khan, Y. (2017). *The Great Partition*. Yale University Press.

leaders were kept behind the bars, Jinnah, who had presented himself as a loyal supporter of the British then, garnered support by uniting opinions in favour of himself as the most capable safeguard for Muslim interests against Hindu supremacy. After the war ended and the Congress Party leaders were released, Nehru held the belief that Jinnah exemplified the complete absence of civilised thinking. Gandhi, on the other hand, referred to him as a maniac and an evil genius. The discord between the Nehru-Gandhi duo and Jinnah ran so high that any kind of reconciliation looked impossible.³⁶

The British government sent Louis Mountbatten, a minor Royal, to India to oversee their departure from the subcontinent. To avoid a situation where the British would have to play the referee in a violence-torn society divided on the communal lines, he tried to bring all the parties to table. Frustrated with his encounter with Jinnah in a series of discussions and negotiation, it eventually struck him that partition was the only solution to the political stalemate. What he, or anyone else, on both the British and Indian sides, could not imagine was the social repercussions of this abrupt political solution. In June, Mountbatten surprised everyone by declaring August 15, 1947, as the date for the transfer of power, which was ten months ahead of schedule. The reasons for Mountbatten's haste are still debated, but it is likely that he intended to shock the conflicting parties into recognising the imminent danger of sectarian conflict. However, the hurriedness further intensified the disorder. In a race against time, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British barrister, was tasked with the responsibility of delineating the borders of the two newly to-be-formed states in South Asia. He had a limited time frame of approximately forty days to complete this assignment and even more limited ground knowledge about the soil that he was tasked to redraw. In effect, in

³⁶Dalrymple, W. (2015, June 22). The bloody legacy of Indian partition. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

1947, South Asia underwent irreversible changes within a few frenetic months. The alterations made within such a short period of time have had a lasting impact even after seven decades.³⁷



*Figure 3: Map of undivided British India. Also showing British Ceylon and other neighbours.
Source: NZ History*

India and Pakistan, since then, have nurtured mutual antipathy. Two inconclusive wars were fought over the disputed region of Kashmir, the sole Muslim-majority province that remained in India. In 1971, a conflict arose regarding the secession of East Pakistan, resulting in the establishment of Bangladesh. In 1999, as a result of the infiltration of Pak proxies with army regulars in the Kargil sector of Kashmir, a tense situation emerged again, taking the two neighbours very close to a nuclear conflict. Despite occasional attempts at peace talks and temporary improvements in relations, this way the saga of Indo-Pak animosity continues to be the prevailing political norm in the region. In Pakistan, a large portion of the female population remains illiterate, while defence

³⁷Ibid.

expenditures consume one-fifth of its budget, leaving funds for health, education, infrastructure, and development scarce. Pakistan's sense of insecurity can be attributed to several factors: India's significantly larger population, defence budget, and economy, which are approximately seven times greater than those of Pakistan. To counter such demographic and military superiority, Islamabad went on cultivating non-state actors which ultimately had bloody consequences for both nations. The *jihadi* elements used by Pakistan have caused equal damage to Pak state and society, if not more, as they have troubled ISI's intended targets—India and Afghanistan.³⁸ The region, thus, owes much of its present political and security issues to the partition.

1.9 Cold War and South Asia

The Cold War, the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, played a significant role in shaping the history of South Asia. The United States and the Soviet Union sought to expand their sphere of influence and gain strategic allies during the Cold War. In South Asia, like any other region in the world at that time, this led to the formation of alliances with countries sharing more or less the same political ethos and having convergent strategic interests. At first the United States favoured an alliance with India considering the fact that the latter emerged as a liberal democracy, apparently having the potential of fighting against communism. However, India's insistence on neutrality frustrated the US, and soon Washington was courting Pakistan to have a foothold in the subcontinent. Pakistan, declaring their affiliation quite clearly, became a member of the SEATO and the CENTO in the mid-1950s, though these memberships remained largely symbolic. India was then leading a platform called

³⁸Ibid.

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which was essentially a forum of the newly-independent, economically backward countries of the global south, championing Asian and African solidarity. However, after the Sino-Indian War in 1962, India moved closer to the Soviet Union, which supported its security concerns. Besides, the Cold War scaled up the arms race between India and Pakistan to a significant level, which also prompted India to search for a friend in a superpower.

Disillusioned by the Chinese aggression in 1962, Indian policy went for a more pragmatic way and New Delhi found a friend in Moscow as the Soviets were unhappy with the Chinese too. To face any future Chinese threat on par, India started modernising its military with Russian help. This provoked Pakistan to seek help from the US as Islamabad feared that modern equipment could be used against them too. As a result, the Soviet Union and the United States started providing military assistance to India and Pakistan periodically, further fuelling the arms race. This militarisation had long-lasting consequences for the stability and security of South Asia; and the region became another theatre for proxy conflicts during the Cold War. For example, the United States supported Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani wars (in 1965 and 1971), while the Soviet Union provided military aid as well as security assurance to India. The Cold War dynamics sometimes amplified regional conflicts and prolonged their resolution; starting from water sharing of international rivers to messing in each other's internal crises. Arguably, the Cold War had indirectly contributed to nuclear proliferation in South Asia as well.

Other than the military aspect, there is politics of aid too. Both the superpowers patronised their respective clients with financial and technological incentives. This aid influenced the economic policies and development trajectories of South Asian countries, contributing to their economic and social dynamics. Having a closed economy, India was depending on its domestic consumption for economic growth; but in an effort to check foreign investments and goods, it blocked the road of

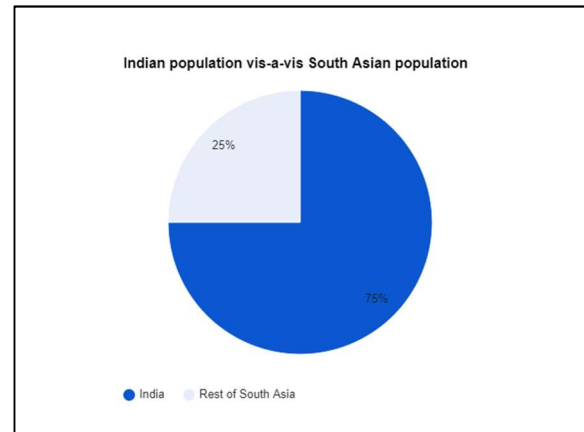
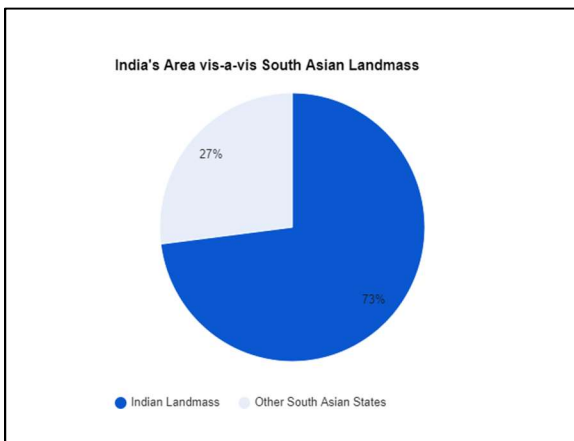
new technologies too. For that India became heavily dependent on the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Pakistan was even more dependent on the US aid and technological support due to their ill-planned, sluggish economy. Also, both were spending a lot on their military budget; but having a much larger population and economy, India was able to utilise the received aid in other developmental sectors as well, whereas Pakistan could hardly do that due to its internal political and economic mess.

The Cold War and the superpowers' constant nudging to their respective clients never allowed the South Asian region to realise the enormous potential in intra-regional trade. India and Pakistan's steadfast animosity had been furthered by the US and the Soviets by adding fuel to the fire in the form of arms and aid, thereby crippling the opportunity that lay in trade and commerce; and consequently, depriving all seven countries of the region. The potential for regional cooperation mechanisms were never fully utilised due to the mutual suspicion among the two major states of the region; which was a hallmark of the Cold War throughout the globe. Overall, the Cold War significantly influenced South Asian history by shaping alliances, fuelling conflicts, driving military build-ups, escalating nuclear proliferation, and impacting economic and development policies. The legacy of the Cold War continues to have implications for the region's politics, security, and international relations today. Though during the same period, a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) had gained momentum and the states of South Asia, on principle, became a part of it, the shadow of big power politics undoubtedly loomed large in those five decades.

PART II: India in South Asia

1.10 Indian Dominance in South Asia

India is widely regarded as the dominant power in South Asia. There are several factors that contribute to India's dominant position in the region. India is the largest country in South Asia in terms of both land area, occupying a little over 73% of the landmass, and population, which ticks to about 75% of the whole region with little over 1.4 billion people (both figures excluding Afghanistan).³⁹⁴⁰ The sheer size and scale of India gives it a natural head start in terms of economic and military capabilities, as well as diplomatic clout.



India has the largest economy in South Asia, contributing to the scale of 80% of the region's overall economic activities (measured in terms of GDP).⁴¹ It has a diverse and rapidly growing economy, with sectors such as information technology, manufacturing, and services playing a vital role.

³⁹Surface Area (Sq.KM)- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?locations=8S>

⁴⁰Population, total- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

⁴¹GDP (Current US\$)- South Asia. (2023). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=8S>

India's economic strength gives it the ability to influence regional trade, investment, and economic cooperation. India also has the most powerful military in South Asia, in terms of manpower, equipment and technology. It possesses a vast range of both conventional and modern military capabilities, including a nuclear arsenal, a large standing army, and an advanced missile defence system along with cutting edge drone surveillance system or sophisticated firewall for cyber warfare. It is also to be noted that India has the world's largest standing paramilitary forces which are not very far behind the military in terms of training and arsenal; and some of them are highly specialised in particular battle skills.

India's size, population, and economic strength coupled with a sophisticated, tech-driven war machine translate into extensive political influence in South Asia which cannot be overlooked. As a result, it plays a crucial role in regional organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and has the ability to shape regional policies and priorities. India's political influence is further bolstered by its democratic system and its historical role as a leader in the non-aligned movement. Long held democratic traditions marked by periodic peaceful transition of power give India a moral advantage in leadership claims and it also garners the crucial trust of the international community. Then there is its unique geography which makes it the pivot of South Asia and provides a deep strategic advantage. India shares borders with all the six countries in the region, while none of them share borders between them; this helps it have more influence than other regional powers in their neighbourhood. Additionally, India's control over the Indian Ocean and its maritime interests reaffirms its position as a dominant and central power in the South Asian region.

Such centrality ascribes India to play the role of communicator, facilitator and/ or sometimes mediator in South Asian affairs, even if that is not endorsed by some neighbours or outside powers.

Sri Lankan diplomat Lakshman Kadirgamar once described this centrality beautifully, using the analogy of a wheel. According to him at the hub of the wheel lies regionally preponderant India and the spokes are India's neighbours with each of whom India shares land or maritime boundaries, but no two others are thus joined without at the same time touching India also.⁴² Any discussion about social, economic and political developments in South Asia cannot be put in perspective keeping India outside its purview. Whether India is a hegemon or a leader, a bully or a reluctant big brother, are matters of debate though.⁴³ In words of Bhabani Sengupta, an Indian political commentator, it can easily be said:

“The Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. And the seventh, that is India, will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful.”⁴⁴

This centrality and dominant position of India is perceived by the neighbours in varied ways, ranging from a reliable and dependable neighbour to a hegemon on its way to build up a sphere of influence at the cost of others. Though sometimes they appreciate India's leadership role and value its contributions to regional initiatives; more often, they have concerns about India's intentions, as they worry about their own sovereignty and the potential for India to exercise undue influence or interfere in their internal affairs. These concerns are often based on historical tensions or geopolitical considerations. The creation of Bangladesh, bifurcating Pakistan in 1971, has had a deep impact on the neighbours' psyche. India's bloody involvement in Sri Lanka's civil war is another example where the exertion of influence turned ugly. In domestic politics of Nepal or

⁴²Kadirgamar, L. (2003, December 29). Securing South Asia. *The Hindu*.

⁴³Bhasin, M. (2008). India's Role in South Asia: Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership? *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 3(4), 72–88. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45340757>.

⁴⁴Sengupta, B. (1984). The Big Brother Syndrome. *India Today*.

Bangladesh, India is a recurrent reference as some groups are in favour of strengthening ties with India while others see it as a manipulator. Also, the neighbouring countries, especially the smaller ones, feel a sense of power asymmetry when dealing with India. They feel India's size, population, and economic and military strength are so overpowering that it cannot lead to equal partnerships or balanced regional relationships. They seek to balance or diversify their alliances to safeguard their interests, opening the roads for extra-regional powers like China.

The major factors that contribute to reservations among the neighbours about India's relative supremacy in the region are diverse. Almost all of them fear about India's hegemonic intentions and given India's preponderance in the region, this fear is not totally unjustified. This is truer for those who have ongoing border disputes with India, such as Pakistan and Nepal. Trade imbalance too makes them insecure. Dealing with a large economy like India, smaller states feel they would lose out in the transactions, especially in the long run. Management of shared water resources is another bone of contention. South Asia has a complex international river ecosystem and water becomes politically boiled more often than not with regard to sharing of water in an equitable way. India is also accused of meddling in other states' internal political affairs by using economic incentives; though these accusations are mostly unfounded, it definitely creates an atmosphere of distrust in the region as a whole.

1.11 Major Challenges for India in South Asia

There are few long-standing and some relatively recent challenges that India faces in its neighbourhood despite its ostensible dominance in the region. An indicative list of such challenges, as an exhaustive list is quite impossible to chart, may be helpful in understanding India's position in South Asia.

Border Disputes

Many of the political conflicts in the South Asian region can be traced back to border disputes; i.e. different interpretations of borders by different sides. Mostly these are the remnants of colonial legacy, but some goes deeper into history than that. India and Pakistan have fought three major wars, and many more limited armed conflicts have taken place between them due to the unsettled nature of the border between the two. Kashmir has been a bone of contention from the very day of independence. The Muslim majority princely state ruled by a Hindu ruler joined the Indian republic in the face of a Pakistani onslaught just after the partition sowed the seeds of one of the longest-drawn as well as militarily engaging disputes of history. Even today, after more than seven decades of freedom from colonial rule, the Kashmir issue determines the path of South Asian politics to a large extent, especially with regard to regional cooperation mechanisms. Efforts have gone south time and again to float a jointly managed, cooperative and mutually beneficial regional economy due to the volatile political nature of Indo-Pak relations, thanks to the Kashmir issue. Though South Asia is one of the poorest regions in the world, in terms of per capita income and standards of average livelihood, the intra-regional economy is still staggeringly low compared to its potential. Whenever a proposal is launched by India in this respect, advocating a free trade zone in the region or something similar to that effect but with a limited mandate, it is always blocked by Pakistan, suspecting spreading of Indian influence deep into the region's core, including theirs. Same sort of problem remains on the eastern side too. As a result of a hurried partition, the borders of Bengal along with Assam and Tripura with the then East Pakistan were disputed; and a strange outcome had emerged out of that, the enclaves. After the emergence of independent Bangladesh, extensive and time-consuming negotiations have been carried out between the successive governments in New Delhi and Dhaka, and the resultant Land Boundary Agreement had come into

force only in 2015. Though the border dispute is now officially settled, the actual borders on the ground remain porous and cross-border illegal movement of humans and restricted/ illegal goods are common; and this often becomes an issue of domestic politics both in India and Bangladesh.

More difficult and technically more complicated is the border between India and its northern neighbour China which could flare up anytime had the periodic escalations not been brought under control by both sides. China believes the eastern part of Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir state of India, known as the Aksai Chin (though currently Ladakh is a Union Territory) and the whole of Arunachal Pradesh on India's north-eastern flank are parts of Tibet, which were taken away during the British era. As Tibet is now an official part of China, logically to Beijing, Aksai Chin and Arunachal also belong to them. India favours the alternative interpretation that as an inheritor of British India, the regions that were controlled by the British and where the colonial administration was operational at the time of independence are a part of it. The Line of Actual Control, thus, has remained a challenged proposition and intermittent heat along the Line has remained a common phenomenon, especially since 1962. The latest clash between the Indian and Chinese troops in Galwan Valley in June, 2020 is one such example; and the stalemate after the clash is yet to be resolved.

India has some border related disagreements with Nepal too, especially in the Kalapani and Lipulekh Pass regions. Though this disagreement has never turned into large scale disputes involving force, still this is a friction point in otherwise peaceful Indo-Nepal relations. A couple of years back, Nepal published a political map of its territory including these areas inside their borders, thus creating strong resentment in New Delhi. The then Prime Minister of Nepal K.P. Sharma Oli (who is back in the prime minister's chair again) pitched for the same in mobilising public support for his weak government. After the change in prime ministerial face in Kathmandu,

the temporary disquiet was put into the back burner once again. This shows, though such gestures are highly symbolic, however, they have the capacity to destabilise bilateral ties for the time being, whatever short duration that may be. With Sri Lanka, there are some issues relating to the difference in interpretation about each country's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) on the Bay of Bengal, sometimes leading to arrests of fishermen on both sides. Same problem occurs with Pakistan as well in the Arabian Sea.

Other than the cases of Pakistan and China, none of these border issues are a serious threat to India's security and stability. As China is showing strong intentions in playing a role in South Asian politics, these minor issues may escalate in future nevertheless, or they may be used as leverage to reap undue advantages from India playing the China card in an implied way. Bhutan and the Maldives do not pose any challenge with respect to borders, but they have some special needs, due to their unique geography, to be addressed by New Delhi. Myanmar is officially not a part of the South Asian region, but having quite a long and poorly manned border with India, sometimes influences, however unintentionally, North-East India's politics. So does Afghanistan. It practically does not share borders on the ground, keeping in mind the *de facto* nature of the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, still political changes in Kabul significantly impact the Kashmir valley.

Political Violence

Armed rebellions by non-state actors are quite common across the globe, and this is also the case with South Asia. Political conflicts taking an armed dimension can be categorised into domestic or international. Almost all the countries of the South Asian region are volatile to different degrees; some suffer from internal resistance toward the state by different factions of the population while some others are torn along the ethnic lines. It can be the case of the Naxalite extremism in India

and Nepal, or ethnic rivalry in Sri Lanka (ethnic Sinhalese vs the Tamil), Pakistan (the Baloch or the Tribal self-determination movements) and Bhutan (the expulsion of the Lhotshampas from Bhutan for example).

The process of state formation in South Asia was a messy affair and the process of nation-building has been even more complicated. As a result of historical burdens, internal cohesion as a nation and the interrelationship between the state and the nation are two factors that dominate the region's political landscape to a large extent. India being the largest and most powerful in the region more often than not got intermingled in these crises, willingly or unwillingly. There is also the practice of using proxies to destabilise internal politics and security of neighbours. Pakistan uses proxies in Kashmir and in other parts of India, to disturb peace and order. Islamabad alleges India is doing the same with Baloch national movement using Iranian soil. Political violence is common in Nepal and Bangladesh with regard to change and formation of governments. The Maldives had also seen violence and political bitterness after the end of Gayoom's authoritarian rule of three decades. The porous nature of borders and frequent movement of people and ideas make all the states vulnerable to each other's internal chaos and uptick political disorder in South Asia.

Climate Change

Climate change is no longer a future threat; it is very much a present-day phenomenon leaving its scars around the world in the form of natural disasters. In recent times India has faced severe floods, brutal drought-like situations and extreme winters as well as some ravaging super cyclones. Pakistan has been ravaged by two mega floods in the last one decade. Nepal is yet to recover from the wounds of the 2015 earthquake. The Maldives and parts of Sri Lanka are on the verge of inundation by the sea, as the sea levels are rising fast. South Asia is a very densely populated region and this huge population is putting enormous pressure on the environment and depleting

natural resources like drinking water. Studies have found that most of the burden of any ecological disaster is borne by the lowest rung of the economic ladder. It is pertinent to note here that South Asia is not only populous but also poor. Any sudden (or gradual, for that matter) change in the natural setting will have a significant impact on the industrial production and agriculture; the two pillars of the South Asian economy on which millions of people of the region depend. Climate change will have a profound impact on livelihoods of the inhabitants who are very loosely protected by their respective states. India is the engine of the region's economy as well as the most advanced in technology. Thus, it is imperative for India to draw a plan to cope up with climate change in a cooperative and joint mechanism as none can remain unaffected from the actions of others. An economically devastated and uprooted population inside or around the borders is no way an ideal situation for national security.

Other than the three issues, there are a lot of other concerns that need urgent attention; like the influence of extra-regional powers in South Asia, deteriorating neighbour relations due to the rhetoric of domestic politics, rise of populism in some neighbouring states etc. China's interest in South Asia is now evident and India needs to address the short-term and long-term threats posed by aggressive Chinese diplomacy. Using hate politics for short term power gains in the domestic arena often hurts sentiments in the neighbourhood, having detrimental effects on bilateral ties in the long run. Issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of India and campaigns by the ruling party using a legal instrument for political benefits do not send positive signal to some of the neighbours. Populism is thriving in the neighbouring states too; the claims by the Oli administration in Nepal with regard to the disputed tri-junction area is one such example. Democracy deficit is another issue that may also put India in a fix. It is difficult not to accept the rise and controlling powers of the Pak Army in the political corridors of Islamabad in the last

couple of years, while it seems equally problematic to open channels of talks with them directly. At times, effort to maintain steady relations with a neighbouring government creates discomfiture in relations with a friendly external power. The recently concluded national election of Bangladesh is an example of that, where New Delhi and Washington were clearly seen standing on different plains. Therefore, in general, the situation in South Asia is as flux as it has ever been. The apparent dominance of India in the region is, thus, not unchallenged.

1.12 The Disruptive Effects of the Chinese BRI in South Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched by China in 2013 during President Xi Jinping's official visit to Kazakhstan. The BRI is a central policy of the Chinese Communist Party, designed to enhance China's global presence by developing connections with expansion of infrastructure, and closer political and cultural relations. The objectives of the perceived Maritime Silk Road under the BRI is to establish a link between China and the North Sea by traversing various countries and regions, including Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, the Suez Canal, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. China's objective in establishing this link is twofold: to secure its routes to the oil sources in West Asia, and to address strategic concerns in South Asia and Southeast Asia, which include the presence of the US and Indian troops in the Indian Ocean and the potential blockade of the Strait of Malacca.

The South Asian region is of substantial importance in this larger scheme. China has implemented wide-ranging strategies to establish connections with the Indian Ocean, in an effort to reduce dependence on one trade and supply route. One of the most ambitious projects is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a combination of highways, railways and pipelines making a grid, and connecting its Xinjiang province to Gwadar Port in Balochistan; with several power

plants and mines along the line of the CPEC. In a similar project, in Sri Lanka, it secured the development and management contract of the Hambantota Port, the Norochcholai Power Plant, and the Colombo Port City. In Bangladesh, Beijing has already invested in several infrastructure projects; and recently it has shown interest in developing a composite irrigation project on Teesta, a river with the potential to stoke anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladesh. China has successfully stretched its influence over smaller nations like Maldives, Nepal, and (to a minor extent) Bhutan, by capitalising on their concerns about India coupled with enticement of economic needs. In Myanmar, Beijing is in the process of building the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), replicating the CPEC model, connecting its landlocked south-western provinces to the Bay of Bengal through the Kyaukpyu Port. Until recently China was quite alien to most South Asian countries and it culturally stands far away from them; still it has been able to create a base of clientele among the ruling elites pretty fast.⁴⁵

India has correctly measured this Chinese inroad and its long-term consequences from the very beginning and adjusted its strategy in the neighbourhood accordingly. India is bilaterally deeply engaged with all the neighbours for a long time. With the advent of the new world order at the end of the Cold War, it devised a new strategy under the name of Look East Policy, giving more attention to the eastern neighbourhood which offered more economic promises and less political troubles. With the announcement of the BRI, and witnessing a visible energy on China's part to stretch its strategic arm in its neighbourhood, India boosted the policy of such engagement with renaming it as the Act East Policy and making real moves on the ground with its own basket of infrastructure projects. With declaration of the 'Neighbourhood First' doctrine, Prime Minister

⁴⁵Mohan, V. (2021, August 25). *Changing Political Dynamics in South Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects on Indian Regional Hegemony*. Air University. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=10&ModuleId=20562&Article=2743694>

Narendra Modi further strengthened India's commitment to this new outlook on the neighbourhood. The sudden attaching of prominence and economic push towards the sub-regional platforms such as the BIMSTEC or the BBIN are proof of such realignment. The Indian initiatives are putting highest emphasis on regional connectivity; and India has commissioned a number of projects either independently or in collaboration with countries like Japan and the US.

The initial objective of the Look East policy was to enhance India's economic ties with the Southeast Asian region through trade and investment. Over time, this policy has not only extended its geographic scope to encompass Japan, South Korea, and Australia, but it has also acquired notable strategic and political implications. India has established strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, in the Chinese neighbourhood. Furthermore, it has developed strong connections with the member countries of the ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). India's Act East policy aligns closely with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative and South Korea's New Southern Policy. All of them acknowledge the importance of the ASEAN region, and share economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, which presents a significant opportunity for collaborative efforts.⁴⁶ Therefore, it can be said without any doubt that India is taking recourse to every possible strategy to keep its perceived sphere of influence in South Asia intact in the face of Chinese diplomatic manoeuvring.

⁴⁶Kesavan, K. V. (2020, February 14). India's 'Act East' policy and regional cooperation. *Observer Research Foundation*. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-act-east-policy-and-regional-cooperation-61375/>

2.13 The Question of Leadership of India

In some political and bureaucratic circles of New Delhi, there has been a given notion that India is the natural leader of South Asia and it is her duty to safeguard interests of the region in the world stage as that would secure, in turn, its own interests as well. This belief system is inherited from the British Raj. The Raj was able to bring the region under one political and administrative structure somewhat successfully. The diversity of the region which often runs in the opposite directions to each other was kept under the carpet by the colonial powers with a narrative of modernisation of the subcontinent; and where the narrative did not work, force was applied. It is true that modern, independent India traces its lineage to the Raj, but so is Pakistan and Bangladesh. Though there are undeniable civilisational linkages among these three, Pakistan, for the very basis of its existence, dissociates itself from that link. Thus, it is a political fantasy that India would exercise the inheritance of the Raj unilaterally and others, especially Pakistan, would follow. There is a serious mistake, therefore, in the logic of taking the whole region as a uniform political entity and ascribing the leadership to its own. No doubt, this notion is attractive and as a result it has remained alive in policy parlance of Delhi since independence; but time and again it has been proved to be counterproductive and each time the blame went to the incumbent government of the time instead of the policy itself.

Attaining the regional leadership is contingent upon resolving the historical and geographical contradictions. The regional policy of any government is a complex process with various probable outcomes that cannot be evaluated in a simplistic manner. However, it is undeniable that India has experienced a consistent improvement in its relative position within the region in recent decades. India's economic growth and increased focus on regional affairs have positively influenced its

strategic footing in South Asia. Nevertheless, the region has experienced an escalation in challenges too, particularly due to the increasing regional influence of China.⁴⁷

Let us look at our eastern and northern borders which largely prove the assertion. The relationship between New Delhi and Dhaka highlights the perennial challenges resulting from the Partition. One positive aspect is the resolution of boundary disputes in recent times though. Still the memories of partition loom large with regard to the affairs of religious minorities and cross-border movement of people, and to a very significant level. There are no readily available solutions in the short term to address these challenges that pose a threat to the overall bilateral relationship. On the brighter side, trade, economic and political ties have improved in the past couple of decades and that has helped to counteract the negative trends to a good extent.⁴⁸ On the northern front, China's growing influence in Nepal and Bhutan is now evident and it has diminished India's traditional primacy in its bilateral relationship with them. Delhi's lack of preparation in dealing with the long-term challenges posed by China is now apparent and it has somewhat lost its previous unrestricted kind of access to both the capitals. New Delhi now has limited options from Kathmandu, if not Thimphu, falling under the circle of influence of Beijing. The ongoing conflict in the Indo-China border is of particular concern in this context.⁴⁹

To effectively address the challenges in the region, it seems sensible for India to prioritise regional development, actively work towards resolving long standing conflicts, promote economic

⁴⁷Raja Mohan, C. (2022, January). *India and South Asia: The Elusive Sphere of Influence*. Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS. Retrieved August 14, 2023, from https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-and-south-asia-the-elusive-sphere-of-influence/#_ftn7

⁴⁸*India–Bangladesh Relations @50: Commemorating Bilateral Ties*. (n.d.). Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/series/india-bangladesh-relations-50-commemorating-bilateral-ties/>

⁴⁹Wagner, C. (2020, November). *The India-China competition in the Himalayas: Nepal and Bhutan* | ISPI. Italian Institute International Political Studies. Retrieved August 14, 2023, from <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/india-china-competition-himalayas-nepal-and-bhutan-28258>

openness with neighbouring countries, and foster opportunities for shared prosperity. The neighbours' responses will certainly differ, and some will still favour the Chinese option, but the only viable approach is to make gradual progress whenever and wherever possible. Merely asserting a sphere of influence and claiming leadership role would only enhance the fear of hegemony among the neighbours and ultimately lead to diplomatic failures. Rather focussing on its growth trajectory and involving its neighbours in the process and making them a part of the success story would grow confidence in India and also counter Chinese loan diplomacy.⁵⁰

1.14 Conclusion

The primacy of India in South Asia is an undeniable fact; but whether it is the leader of the region, is a debatable question. One may wonder here, why such a leadership role is so coveted. Or, is it really that important? During the Nehruvian era, India ascribed such a role to itself and it was not challenged, except for by Pakistan, because none of the neighbours were interested in larger world affairs, and they were busy in nation-building and state making at that time. The leadership question and the fancy around it continued until the end of the Cold War when a new multi-polar world order was about to come. No one in New Delhi probably thought, at that time, that China would soon emerge as a pole in that multi-polar world. Moreover, post liberalisation, India's rapid economic progress necessitated an environment of peace and stability to continue in that path of growth. All these factors led to reorientation in India's neighbourhood policy, and New Delhi opened itself up to the ideas of 'minilateralism' and sub-regional cooperation mechanisms in the

⁵⁰Raja Mohan, C. (2022, January). *India and South Asia: The Elusive Sphere of Influence*. Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS. Retrieved August 14, 2023, from https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-and-south-asia-the-elusive-sphere-of-influence/#_ftn7

face of such new realities. Shifting focus from ‘leading’ the region to ‘accommodating’ the neighbours in its growth trajectory by means of multilateral cooperation on different platforms is the essence of India’s new neighbourhood policy orientation.

Strategically containing China in the neighbourhood, and carrying on with its economic strides—are two objectives that India clearly prioritised from the mid-1990s. Keeping the extreme divergence among the South Asian states in mind, cooperation at the bilateral level seemed not enough and multilateral efforts were the need of the time. The shape and scope of such efforts evolved over the last three or four decades though; as in the face of limited progress under a pan-regional initiative, several smaller alternatives with limited objectives emerged. Since then, the journey continues, with stages of success coupled with some setbacks from time to time. This research aims to investigate such arrangements in the context of India’s neighbourhood policy. In the next chapters we will discuss about India’s bilateral ties with six South Asian neighbours, as well as two important neighbours from the adjoining regions, which are Afghanistan and Myanmar, to understand the path of India’s engagement with the neighbours since independence, followed by India’s engagement with the neighbourhood through various multilateral platforms.

Chapter 2

India's Bilateral Ties with South Asian Neighbours (1):

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives

2.1 Introduction

Since independence, India has been deeply engaged with all of its neighbours bilaterally. This bilateralism is a colonial legacy. British India was in favour of engaging the states on its periphery on a one-on-one basis, as it gave them leverage from economic and military point of view, and also allowed them to use different tactics for different neighbours on the basis of these states' level of conformity to the British interests in the region at large. Independent India inherited British India, not only in legal terms but also with regard to its position on the South Asian landscape to a major extent. Modern Bangladesh was part of Pakistan at the time of independence and partition; while Sri Lanka, Maldives, along with Burma (now Myanmar) were under British control; deeply connected to but not part of British India as such. Afghanistan under the monarchy and Tibet as a Buddhist theocracy and a weak China on the north, along with three small, weak Himalayan monarchies of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan was the reality at the time of Indian independence. This backdrop changed very quickly starting from the 1950s. The international political arrangements evolved, and so did these neighbouring states and their aspiration; and, two precise factors, the Cold War and the rise of China since the late 1980s in the post-Cold War era had particular bearings on this. As a result, the old school political bilateralism of India had to make way for new forms of engagement, in the form of economic and developmental bilateralism, as well as multilateral initiatives in various shapes.

This chapter tries to provide a brief outline of bilateral relations that India has with its four neighbours, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Nepal and Bhutan are discussed in the next chapter. Sri Lanka and Maldives were British colonies on the edges of an undivided British India, and in that way, they were closely linked to the latter in almost every possible aspect; but, Nepal and Bhutan never came under direct British control, and they had been able to maintain certain degree of autonomy as well as political-administrative distinctiveness. Following this logic, we have divided the two chapters, followed by another one discussing India's bilateral relations with Afghanistan and Myanmar.

There is a volume of literature on this subject and some of those scholarly works have been looked into here. The main focus of this chapter remains on the current developments around India and its role in those happenings though. Sometimes India is an active participant, at other times, a mere spectator; either willingly or unwillingly. To explore the sub-regional mechanisms in India's neighbourhood policy, which is the primary objective of this thesis, it is worth traversing through the bilateral plains first; and it is also necessary to put things in perspective from the unit level frame before moving on to the general framework.

2.2 India-Pakistan Relations

The India-Pakistan relations are essentially hostile and this hostility is primarily rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, territorial, and cultural factors. The traumatic partition of British India in 1947 led to the creation of India and Pakistan as two separate states. This process was marred by violence, displacement, and communal tensions, leaving a legacy of mistrust and bitterness. Territorial disputes between the two newly independent states fuelled rivalry from the very day both came into the global map.

The dispute over the region of Kashmir has been a central point of contention between India and Pakistan since 1947. Both countries claim Kashmir in its entirety, but control different parts of it; thus, making the state most notable and enduring territorial dispute between the two. Its ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, a Hindu ruler with a Muslim-majority population, initially (at the time of partition) sought to remain independent. However, tribal militias from Pakistan invaded Kashmir soon after the British exit, leading the Maharaja to accede to India in exchange for military assistance. This triggered the first Indo-Pakistani war in 1947-48 and laid the groundwork for the ongoing Kashmir conflict; and, since then, Kashmir provided the basis for mutual animosity in the overall Indo-Pak bilateral relations.

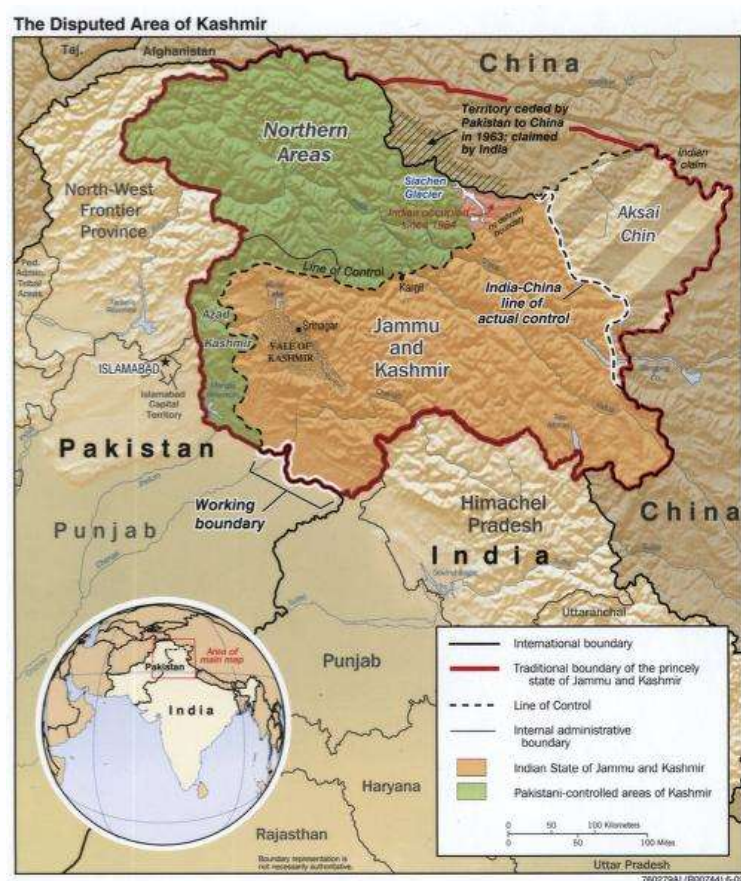


Figure 4: The map of the Princely State of Kashmir in 1947.
Source: US Library of Congress

Princely states were territories ruled by local monarchs, often with a degree of autonomy, within the broader framework of British colonial rule. When India and Pakistan gained independence, the question of whether these princely states would join one of the two states or remain independent posed a critical challenge. Many princely states had Hindu rulers but Muslim-majority populations, or vice versa. The choice of whether to accede to India or Pakistan became a complex decision for these rulers. In addition to that, partition was done on the communal line and the formation of Pakistan was based on religious identity. The scenes of violence during and immediately after the partition were impossible to fade away in a generation or two. Hence, from the very beginning, adverse narratives were created against each other, at the community as well as the state level. Moreover, against the Muslim nationalism, there had been a rise of the Hindu nationalism in India, which sought to see the Muslims of the subcontinent as outsiders. This mutual hatred was often nurtured by the newly independent Pakistan at the state level; while on the other hand, at societal level in India. The resultant distrust has been so deep that any meaningful engagement has remained unattainable.

Big power politics played an important role in this too. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US lost interest in the Mujahideen that it had nurtured in the 1980s in collusion with Pakistan. Both superpowers leaving the scene in quick succession in the late 1980s developed some sort of power vacuum in the western borders of the subcontinent. In such a backdrop, Pakistan's defence intelligence agency, the ISI, swiftly diverted those battle-hardened fighters to Indian Kashmir, resulting in an eruption in the valley with numerous insurgent groups. The prevailing dissatisfaction of a section of the Muslim community of Kashmir turning into a full-scale insurgency against the Indian state was evidently a handiwork of Islamabad. On the other

hand, Pakistan accuses New Delhi of supporting the Baloch nationalist and other secessionist movements within its territory in collusion with Iran.¹

The perennial animosity and distrust as a result of partition, and fuelled by territorial disputes, has been supplemented by other factors too. The sharing of river waters, particularly the Indus River and its tributaries, was a significant irritant between the two countries. The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, brokered by the World Bank, has been successful to address this matter; but disputes over water usage and construction of dams continue to strain relations. Domestic politics has also played its role in this mutual hatred. Pakistan's very existence is apparently legitimised in opposition to India, and its military has used this psyche to strengthen their grip in management of the state. Though Pakistan is no longer that important in India's security and diplomatic calculus, it is an easy target of political rhetoric and an instrument of securing votes in elections in India. Media on both sides often perpetuate negative stereotypes about the other, fuelling nationalist sentiments and making reconciliation more difficult. Therefore, it is a complex relation that the political elites of both sides have been using to different ends, making a friendly and purposeful engagement almost impossible, be it at the bilateral level or in the multilateral platforms.

According to a BBC opinion poll, in 2017, there was a significant increase in negative perceptions of Pakistan among Indians, with a surge of 36 points to reach 85%. This represents the highest increase in negative views compared to all other countries included in the survey. The percentage of Indians with a positive perception of Pakistani influence has decreased by 12 points to just 5%. On the other hand, Pakistan's perception of India has deteriorated significantly since 2014, mirroring India's negative opinion of it. This shift marks the most unfavourable sentiment recorded

¹IANS. (2022, April 1). Pakistan's interior ministry blames Iran for the regrouping of Baloch nationalists. *The Times of India*. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistans-interior-ministry-blames-iran-for-the-regrouping-of-baloch-nationalists/articleshow/90587769.cms>

since the tracking of these views commenced in 2010. The negative sentiment of Pakistanis remains the highest among all the countries surveyed, 62%, while the positive opinion has dropped by half to 11% after 2014.²

2.2.1 History of Conflicts

Indo-Pak relations have largely been shaped by the partition of British India in 1947, the Kashmir conflict, and multiple military face-offs. The partition of British India resulted in a significant human migration, with the displacement of approximately 14 million individuals, along with an estimated loss of life of 1 million.³ India transitioned into a secular democracy with a Hindu majority and a significant Muslim minority, whereas Pakistan emerged as an Islamic republic with a predominantly Sunni Muslim population and a very small population of other religions. After the secession of Bangladesh, the figures of religious minorities had further drastically gone down.

1947-1948: Battle over Kashmir

The first conflict between India and Pakistan arose due to the territorial disputes concerning the erstwhile princely state of Kashmir. In October 1947, Pakistani tribesmen, backed by the newly reorganised Pakistani Army (after the division of assets and men of the British Indian Army between two states), launched an invasion of Kashmir. Maharaja Hari Singh, the then ruler of Kashmir, sought the aid of the Indian armed forces and consented to accede to India in the face of both internal rebellion and external invasion. He delegated authority over his defence,

²*BBC World Service Polls*. (2017). <https://web.archive.org/>. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20210608143515/https://globescan.com/images/images/pressreleases/bbc2017_country_ratings/BBC2017_Country_Ratings_Poll.pdf

³*India partition: our response to the refugee crisis*. (n.d.). British Red Cross. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/our-movement/our-history/india-partition-the-red-cross-response-to-the-refugee-crisis>

communications, and foreign affairs to the Indian government. The war was officially concluded on January 1, 1949, through a ceasefire negotiated and facilitated by the United Nations (UN). This ceasefire resulted in the establishment of a defined 'ceasefire line', the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, and recommendation for a referendum to determine the accession. Pakistan seized control over approximately one-third of the state of princely Kashmir, designating it as Azad (Free) Kashmir and asserting to it a semi-autonomous status.

1965 war

In 1965, India and Pakistan fought their second war, following a series of border skirmishes that occurred between April and September. Though India won the war, both sides suffered significant casualties. It was concluded with the diplomatic intervention of two superpowers, the US and the USSR; and an UN-mandated ceasefire was implemented to halt the armies. Ultimately, the Tashkent Agreement signed by the Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistani President Ayub Khan, mediated by the then Soviet Premier Kosigyn, marked the end of hostilities, and both states resolved to restore normal relations.

1971-1972: The Liberation of Bangladesh

The third war between India and Pakistan was triggered by the conflict arising from East Pakistan's (now Bangladesh) call for independence. The conflict between East and West Pakistan originated from the refusal of the central Pakistani government, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, based in West Pakistan, to allow Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League in East Pakistan, to become the country's prime minister, despite Rahman's party winning the majority of seats in the 1970 parliamentary elections.⁴ On 25th March, 1971, the Pakistani military targeted Dhaka

⁴Naeem, R. (2020, December). The watershed moment in 1970 elections that broke Pakistan. *The Wire*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://thewire.in/south-asia/elections-that-broke-pakistan-1970-history>

University, the intellectual epicentre of the autonomy movement, killing hundreds of students and teachers inside the campus. The already fuming resentment of the Bengalis turned into rage after this cold-blooded mass murder.

East Pakistan declared its independence on March 26, 1971, and the Pak military retaliated with an unprecedented scale of violence. India's official involvement in the conflict began only in December 1971, after the Pakistani Air Force carried out a pre-emptive strike on the airfields of north-western India. In response, New Delhi launched a comprehensive military operation in East Pakistan involving land, air, and sea forces. As a result, the Pakistani Army was compelled to surrender in Dhaka within two weeks, and 90,000 Pakistani soldiers were taken as prisoners of war by the victorious Indian forces.

On December 16, 1971, East Pakistan achieved its independence, declared eight months ago in March, and emerged as a separate nation-state known as Bangladesh. In July 1972, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Pakistani counterpart Zulifqar Ali Bhutto signed the Simla Agreement to resolve the ongoing conflict, which reached a peak after the war, and committed to foster a friendly and harmonious relationship, to maintain lasting peace in the subcontinent. The Simla Agreement also established the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir based on the new ceasefire line between the two countries as on December 17, 1971.⁵ The agreement was later ratified by the parliaments of India and Pakistan.

1989-till date: Insurgency in the Kashmir Valley

The onset of armed insurgency occurred in the Kashmir Valley in the early 1990s. Some Muslim political parties, and some elected representatives too, formed militant wings in response to their

⁵Chari, P. (1999, June). *Kargil, LoC and the Simla Agreement*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=210

accusations of electoral fraud by the state government in the 1987 state legislative elections. Pakistan claimed to have offered ‘moral and diplomatic’ assistance to the militants; though its real part was more proactive and provocative. India believes that attacks on its forces in Jammu & Kashmir are a form of ‘cross-border terrorism’ sponsored by Pakistan as part of its strategy to weaken India through numerous small-scale attacks (‘bleed by thousand cuts’ strategy).⁶ Though Pakistan has officially refuted these claims all along, people of high chairs, like former Army Chief and President Pervez Musharraf, accepted its role in the insurgency in Kashmir later on.⁷

Several terrorist organisations subscribing to pan-Islamic ideals and worldview, such as Lashkar-e-Taibah (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and Hizbul Mujahideen, remain active in the valley. Though relatively peaceful now, Kashmir is still far from what it had been until the mid-1980s. As they have their headquarters and training camps in the POK, it is a major tactical challenge for Indian security forces to keep the valley free from violence incited by these groups.

1998: Nuclear Blasts

India conducted a series of nuclear tests consisting of five detonations at Pokhran, Rajasthan, during 11th-13th May, 1998; the second such tests since 1974. Pakistan reacted by conducting six nuclear detonations in the next few days. The Indian tests surprised the international community; and following the tests, both the nations were subjected to severe economic sanctions. It also made the subcontinent more susceptible to a nuclear war. India maintains its adherence to the doctrine of ‘no first use’, but Pakistan does not subscribe to anything like that.

⁶Singh, H. (2016, April). Pakistan’s policy of a thousand cuts. *The Tribune*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/pakistan-s-policy-of-a-thousand-cuts-219127>

⁷Press Trust of India. (2015, October 28). Pakistan supported, trained terror groups: Pervez Musharraf. *www.business-standard.com*. Retrieved September 7, 2023, from https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/pakistan-supported-trained-terror-groups-pervez-musharraf-115102800015_1.html

1999: Bus Diplomacy followed by the Kargil War

In the backdrop of previous year's nuclear tests and mounting international pressure, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee utilised the inaugural Delhi-Lahore bus service to travel to Lahore in February 1999, for a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif. During Vajpayee's visit, the Lahore Declaration was signed, reaching the first such significant agreement between the two neighbours since the Simla Agreement of 1972. Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to the Simla Agreement and agreed to put into practice Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) with the goal of expanding bilateral relations. Soon after, the Kargil War broke out in May 1999. The Indian troops found that Pakistani forces and tribal militia had invaded and seized strategic positions on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) during the winters. This prompted an Indian counteroffensive, resulting in a limited but fierce war in the high mountains. This war showed the fragility of any peace building effort with Pakistan; as the Pak military was busy capturing strategically important peaks when the two prime ministers were committing to peace in the late winters. Moreover, it also reinforced the duality of the Pakistani state, having two centres of power, one in Islamabad and the other in Rawalpindi.

2001: Attack on the Indian Parliament

On December 13th, 2001, a violent attack was carried out at the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, resulting in the loss of 14 lives. The Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, two banned outfits based in Kashmir, took responsibility for the attack. Following the incident, a massive military build-up was raised by the Indian armed forces along the borders with Pakistan, and Islamabad reacted in the same way, thus getting two countries very close to another full-scale war. The standoff had lasted for almost a year; tensions only to be cooled off by the end of 2002, with international mediation.

The 2008 Mumbai Mayhem

On November 26th, 2008, an extremely violent terrorist attack took place in Mumbai, the commercial capital of India, where armed individuals indiscriminately shot at civilians in multiple locations. The attacks resulted in a death toll exceeding 160 individuals. Ajmal Kasab, the sole surviving assailant, admitted that the perpetrators were affiliated to Lashkar-e-Taiba; and all communications related to the attack were traced back to Pakistan, from where the entire plot was orchestrated. Following this, India temporarily terminated diplomatic ties with Pakistan. Later in 2009, the Pakistani government acknowledged that the Mumbai attacks were indeed hatched from Pakistani soil while refuting any involvement or support from the Pakistani intelligence agencies.

2016: The Pathankot and Uri Episode

In January 2016, terrorists belonging to Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) infiltrated the Pathankot airbase in Punjab, India, posing as Indian soldiers, and carried out a lethal attack. This occurred only a week after Prime Minister Modi's surprise visit (December 2015) to Nawaz Sharif's residence during a familial occasion, with the aim of warming up bilateral relations. In September same year, terrorists belonging to the JeM conducted another attack on an army base in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir. That attack resulted in the loss of 17 Indian soldiers' lives. On September 29th, India carried out a surgical strike across the LoC, targeting terrorist camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in response to the Uri attack.

2017: Cross-border Operations in Retaliation by India

In May 2017, the Indian Army conducted airstrikes on Pakistani Army check posts in Nowshera along the Line of Control (LoC) to halt push-ins from the other side. In July, terrorists attacked Hindu pilgrims in Jammu and Kashmir, resulting in death of at least 7 devotees and injuries to 16

others. It was one of the deadliest attacks of this kind since 2000. In December, Indian Army commandos conducted a cross-border operation in Kashmir. According to the Army sources, a total of 138 Pakistani soldiers were killed in 2017 during tactical operations and cross-border firings along the Line of Control, and India lost 28 soldiers in the same period.⁸

2019: Pulwama Attack and the Surgical Strike

On February 14th, 2019, a suicide bombing in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, resulted in the death of 40 members of the Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). This incident marked the most lethal attack on Indian forces in the region in several decades. On February 15, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) claimed responsibility for the attack and shared a video in which the suicide bomber was praised. On 18th February, JeM terrorists carried out another suicide bombing, resulting in the death of Indian security personnel. Next day, the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan had expressed his willingness to cooperate in the investigation into the Pulwama attack, though Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged a robust retaliation. On February 26, the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted an airstrike against a major training camp of JeM, near Balakot in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Islamabad initially denied any such incident but later acknowledged that Indian fighter aircraft had breached Pak radar and crossed the international border for the bombing. Countering a desperate Pakistani attempt, the IAF successfully destroyed a Pakistani F-16 fighter aircraft, while Pakistan shot down two Indian fighter jets and captured one pilot. On February 28th, Imran Khan announced that the captured Indian Air Force pilot would be released as a gesture of peace. There are indications that the Pakistani prime minister may have faced international

⁸Press Trust of India. (2018, January 10). Indian Army killed 138 Pakistani soldiers in 2017 in tactical operations. *The Economic Times*. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-army-killed-138-pakistani-soldiers-in-2017-in-tactical-operations/articleshow/62443429.cms?from=mdr>

pressure, particularly from the United States.⁹ Anyway, the release of the Indian pilot brought tensions between the two nuclear powers under control.

The conflicts discussed above are only the major ones; there are numerous other relatively smaller incidents that have taken place along the borders every now and then. If we go through the history of conflicts and analyse them, a shifting pattern is easily discernible. During the Cold War phase, the conflicts were mainly at the state level and based on territorial claims. Since the 1990s, after the Cold War, the Pakistani state took a backseat and the proxies were directed to do the job. As a result, the number of incidents has risen significantly, but casualties remained less as full-scale war was avoided consciously. Regional cooperation initiative in South Asia was started during these changing times, in 1985, with the launching of the SAARC. As a result, when it was time for SAARC to grow, an increased number of terrorist attacks and breakdown of law and order in Kashmir had put the two largest members at the loggerheads. Naturally, regional cooperation remained muted during this time.

2.2.2 Nuclear Race

On May 11th, 1998, India became the latest addition to the group of states possessing nuclear capabilities, joining the United States, Russia, England, France, and China. Indian nuclear scientists successfully detonated three atomic devices which collectively possessed a destructive power approximately six times greater than the American bomb deployed in Hiroshima in 1945. The following day, India conducted two additional nuclear explosions, causing further alarm and concern worldwide. While Prime Minister Vajpayee's decision to go nuclear was largely praised

⁹*Indo-Pak Relations*. (n.d.). European Foundation for South Asian Studies. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://www.efsas.org/topics/indo-pak-relations.html>

domestically, the international community reacted sharply, especially the US under the Clinton administration. The American president contended that India's actions were in violation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), despite India not being a signatory of any of the two; and he invoked the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994 to impose economic sanctions on India. President Clinton also requested the cancellation of new loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In addition to that, Japan and other industrialised nations promptly emulated the United States' actions by suspending ongoing projects in India, which amounted to aid worth billions of dollars.¹⁰¹¹

Meanwhile, the leaders of Pakistan were actively exploring their options for conducting a nuclear test as a reply to India. On May 28, Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, declared that Pakistan had detonated five nuclear devices, following India's example. On May 30, Pakistan conducted its sixth nuclear test, surpassing India's five, and Sharif declared that Pakistan would soon acquire the capability to deploy nuclear warheads via missiles. President Clinton, along with the majority of the international community, condemned Pakistan's nuclear testing as well. However, China, being a close ally of Pakistan, was comparatively less severe in its criticism. Like they did in the case of India, the US, Japan, Britain, Canada, and Germany ceased their aid to Pakistan and requested the IMF and the World Bank to suspend loans to it. Despite President Clinton's desire to implement a global economic sanctions regime on India and Pakistan, most Western states had declined to opt for such stern action.¹²

¹⁰*Fact Sheet: India and Pakistan Sanctions*. (1998, June 18). US Department of State Archive. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/sa/fs_980618_india_pak.html

¹¹Saha, P. (2023, May 11). *The 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests: reactions and responses from the Indo-Pacific*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-1998-pokhran-nuclear-tests/>

¹²*Fact Sheet: India and Pakistan Sanctions*. (1998, June 18). US Department of State Archive. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/sa/fs_980618_india_pak.html

Before this, India and Pakistan were engaged in armed conflicts thrice; in 1947, 1965, and in 1971. These wars did not alter the status of Kashmir, but they did lead to the partition of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh. The architects of Indian foreign policy were always concerned about the possibility of a Pakistani attack, but this concern rose manifold in 1962 when China unexpectedly invaded north-east India. It led to the realisation that the perceived age-old protection by the Himalayan mountains was no longer strategically reliable and India must prioritise a robust military capability to safeguard its national security against potential threats from both Pakistan and China, particularly in the event of a two-front war. Following the war in 1962, Indian scientists were authorised by the government to develop nuclear capabilities for military purposes. In 1974, during Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, India conducted a successful nuclear test; thereby demonstrating its scientific capability to develop nuclear weapons. After that, India refrained from conducting further nuclear tests until May 1998 due to international opposition to nuclear tests; though it did not sign the NPT or the CTBT either.

Despite the 24-year hiatus, Indian scientists and political leaders had been actively considering joining the nuclear community all along. In December 1995, it was believed that the Narsimha Rao government was prepared to authorise a nuclear test, however, the US President Clinton dissuaded Prime Minister Rao from proceeding with the tests.¹³ Following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a nationalist and right-leaning political party, in 1998, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was ready to go ahead with the plan discarded by Rao at the last moment. India anticipated the adverse consequences of conducting nuclear tests in terms of financial aid and loans from international bodies, but the leadership was confident that the country

¹³Barr, W. (Ed.). (2013, February). *U.S. Detected Indian Nuclear Test Preparations in 1995, but Photo Evidence was "Clear As Mud."* The National Security Archive, George Washington University. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb412/>

possessed the resilience to withstand such sanctions for a while. Pakistan experienced greater economic consequences than India due to international sanctions; and the withdrawal of aid led to a devaluation of the Pak currency, a significant rise in debt, and an increase in poverty levels.

Undeniably, developing nuclear capability was not an automatic choice for India; rather it was more of a compulsion after 1962. On the other hand, it was difficult for Islamabad to see India going nuclear and do nothing, as that would jeopardise its position against New Delhi; not only militarily but more so psychologically. Therefore, both the neighbours undertook their covert nuclear projects very soon after independence, at the cost of other economic and infrastructure development that they badly needed after the shoddily planned partition.¹⁴ Since these nuclear tests in the late 1990s, both countries have remained cautious in de-escalating any situation which might lead to nuclear brinkmanship. Saying that, fear and distrust also reached a new high after this, affecting efforts to regional cooperation. A region with two nuclear armed states, and a third one at the borders, is never an ideal space for such cooperation.

2.2.3 Current Trends

India-Pakistan relations are currently characterised by minimalism, despite the counter-intuitive nature of this development. Currently, there is minimal bilateral communication, limited prospects for a bilateral breakthrough, and a lack of warmth in the relationship. However, there exists a state of ‘cold peace’ between the historical adversaries, evident in their interactions along the Line of Control, within Kashmir, and through their verbal exchanges. The longstanding India-Pakistan relations has been marked by frequent interactions, significant terror incidents, Indian reactions,

¹⁴Johnson, D. (n.d.). *India-Pakistan Relations: a 50-Year History*. Asia Society. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://asiasociety.org/education/india-pakistan-relations-50-year-history>

the collapse of negotiations, and the subsequent resumption of talks and this may no longer continue in the same manner. Currently, there is a lack of political inclination on New Delhi's part towards establishing meaningful relations, making grand gestures, or engaging in extensive outreach efforts. Bilateral contact is characterised by a tactical, business-oriented, and unemotional approach. At present, foreign policy agenda of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government shows a notable shift away from its initial focus and expectation on Pakistan.

The current dispensation in New Delhi, in the beginning, had initiated diplomatic efforts with Pakistan with renewed energy. Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, was invited to attend Narendra Modi's inaugural function in New Delhi in May 2014 and he attended the ceremony. In a kind of surprise to the world, Mr. Modi made an unscheduled stop in Lahore in December 2015 while on his way back from a diplomatic trip. Additionally, discreet meetings between the two countries' National Security Advisers (NSA) took place. In January 2016, despite the attack on the Pathankot airbase by Jaish-e-Mohammad operatives, New Delhi maintained optimism that situations might improve. However, it did not come to pass. The September 2016 terrorist attack in Uri resulted in a significant deterioration of relations between the two, paving the way for the 'surgical strikes' by India. The Pulwama terror attack in February 2019, and New Delhi's decision to bifurcate Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories, stripping the special status ascribed to Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution in August 2019, further strained the relations between the two neighbours.

Over time, New Delhi has recognised that significant time, commitment, and effort is required to establish peace with Pakistan, with limited assurance of success despite such efforts. The historical and experiential understanding of the impracticality of pursuing a conventional relationship with Islamabad has resulted in the current phase of minimalism. Currently, India-Pakistan relations

have been limited to a discreet exchange of information between the Indian NSA and the Pakistan Army establishment, at best.

The current era of minimalism has become a defining characteristic of India-Pakistan relations for at least five reasons. The relationship between the two countries is characterised by a history of missed opportunities, failed conflict resolution attempts, political challenges arising from the dual power centre in Pakistan, and a lack of political determination on both sides. The series of disappointments experienced by New Delhi have resulted in the recognition that pursuing a comprehensive peace agreement with Pakistan is an unwise endeavour. Furthermore, both parties acknowledge the complexity of their conflicts and the absence of any straightforward solutions, despite the emphasis on conflict resolution. Moreover, they anticipate that the task of resolving bilateral conflicts may become increasingly challenging in the future due to the growing influence of online hate, which is fuelled by, as well as fuelling, the rise of populism on both sides. In this context, there is a growing confidence and conviction in New Delhi that peace within Kashmir can be achieved without engaging with Pakistan. New Delhi's strong faith in its ability to protect Kashmir from Pakistani aggression and terrorist attacks, as well as its belief in the effectiveness of deterrence through punishment, will likely reduce India's willingness to engage in extensive conflict resolution mechanisms with Pakistan.

Currently, both India and Pakistan are more focused on other geopolitical concerns. Pakistan is occupied with the situation developing in Afghanistan, which is under control of the Taliban again. On the other hand, India is dealing with an assertive China along its borders. Consequently, both countries, being engaged in such different issues, had to divert their attention away from each

other.¹⁵ This cold peace state in India-Pakistan bilateral ties is equally harmful, if not more, as the periods of conflicts, for any meaningful multilateral cooperation mechanism at the regional level, be it under SAARC, or any such other platform.

2.3 India-Bangladesh Relations

India and Bangladesh share a complex and multifaceted relationship that encompasses political, economic, cultural, and strategic dimensions. Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, two countries have made efforts to foster cooperation and jointly address various challenges in the region. The foundation of modern-day Bangladesh was laid during the Liberation War of 1971, with India providing support to the Bangladeshi call for independence. India played a crucial role in the eventual creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation, seceding from Pakistan. Since then, the two neighbours have signed numerous bilateral agreements covering trade, security, water sharing, connectivity, and cultural exchanges, giving the relations a structured shape. Notable agreements include the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) of 2015 which resolved the longstanding border disputes and resulted in the exchange of enclaves.

Of late, economic cooperation and connectivity between India and Bangladesh have been given more focus than other areas. India is the second largest trading partner of Bangladesh, and given the immense untapped potential, both the countries were trying to further boost trade and investment. Connectivity initiatives such as the construction and upgrade of roads, bridges, railways, and waterways aim to improve physical links between the two countries and promote

¹⁵Jacob, H. (2022, November 8). The age of minimalism in India-Pakistan ties. *The Hindu*. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-age-of-minimalism-in-india-pakistan-ties/article66108192.ece>

sub-regional connectivity. Sharing of water of common rivers has been a contentious issue though. The two neighbours have been able to come to an agreement regarding the Ganges only, even after decades of negotiations and establishment of a Joint River Commission long back. India and Bangladesh have cooperated on security matters and counterterrorism efforts, given their shared concerns about religious extremism and terrorism in the region. Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts have been instrumental in enhancing mutual understanding between the two countries, thereby reducing the influence of hard-line elements operating against each other. Despite some tangible progress made in these areas, India and Bangladesh still continue to face challenges related to border security and illegal migration, along with trade imbalances, and water sharing. These issues sometimes strain the relationship, especially when the domestic political compulsions of the ruling elites on each side come into play. Besides this bilateral track, the two neighbours are also members of multilateral organisations such as the SAARC and the BIMSTEC, or the informal ones like BBIN, where they collaborate on larger regional issues.

The present political developments in Bangladesh, as a result of the student rebellion against the Hasina government which has already toppled, have put the bilateral relations in front of a new juncture. Which direction it may take in the future is now unclear; and situation on the ground suggests India might have to reboot the whole process of communication. This thesis chapter was drafted when none of these developments were on the horizon, as a result some of the discussions might not be totally in sync with the current situation.

2.3.1 Historical Ties

Prior to the partition of British India in 1947, the region that is now Bangladesh was part of the province of Bengal. The cultural, linguistic, and historical connections among the people of Bengal

were very strong, cutting across religious lines. However, the partition led to the creation of two separate entities: India and Pakistan, and in the process, the erstwhile Bengal province was divided into two parts, and each part went to one of the two newly-born, independent states. In the years following partition, tension between the two wings of Pakistan began to rise due to linguistic and cultural differences between people inhabiting the west and the east. The people of East Pakistan spoke Bengali, and they felt marginalised by the central government, which was based in West Pakistan and dominated largely by Urdu-speaking westerners. This led to the Language Movement of the 1950s, when people in East Pakistan protested against the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language. The movement for recognition of their mother tongue soon took the shape of an autonomy movement, giving rise to Bengali nationalism in the eastern side. Over the years, mainly due to the stubbornness of the West Pakistani elites, this call for autonomy gathered momentum; and with the emergence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the undisputed leader of the east, this got direction as well as popular support from the larger sections of the Bengali-speaking community. Sheikh Mujib advocated for greater representation in the central government proportionate to the population of the east. These demands were not only neglected but also suppressed by the west wing when it came to the formation of government by the Awami League, which won a landslide victory in East Pakistan in 1970 general elections and became the majority party in Pakistan's parliament.

The culmination of years of discontent and demands for autonomy came in 1971. The political and economic disparities and the resultant conflict between East and West Pakistan escalated into a full-blown liberation movement. The brutal suppression of the Bangladeshi population by the Pakistani military led to a humanitarian crisis. India, immensely under pressure due to the huge inflow of refugees in the bordering provinces, provided support to the Bangladeshi freedom

fighters. Both from humanitarian and security perspectives, the Indira Gandhi government felt it could not sit idle in the face of such disorder in the neighbourhood. Providing training and equipment only to the *Muktijoddhas* was not enough against such a state-led violence, it realised. In December 1971, India intervened militarily in support of the Bangladeshi liberation movement after ensuring its own security with a treaty with the Soviet Union. The nine-month-long conflict since the declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujib in March resulted in the defeat of the Pakistani military and independence of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

Following the secession from Pakistan, India, along with Bhutan and Myanmar, was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh and establish diplomatic ties. The two countries share a close bond due to the shared past of the Bengali nation dating back in history and the pivotal role India played in the liberation of Bangladesh. Despite some challenges and occasional tensions, the deeply embedded shared identity on both sides of the international border and the memory of the freedom struggle have played a significant role in shaping India-Bangladesh relations. Signed on March 19, 1972, the Indira-Mujib Agreement (Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Peace) established the framework for friendly relations and guided cooperation between India and Bangladesh since then.

2.3.2 Cooperation in Different Sectors

India and Bangladesh have signed several bilateral agreements over the years covering a wide range of areas, including trade, security, connectivity, water sharing, and cultural cooperation. These agreements have aimed to strengthen relations by addressing mutual concerns and promoting cooperation in various fields. For example, the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), which was signed in 2015, has been a historic milestone that resolved longstanding border

disputes, which were the legacy of the partition, between the two countries. The agreement was negotiated for decades, and during the time of the Manmohan Singh government in New Delhi and the Sheikh Hasina government in Dhaka, it was finalised; later, the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, signed it with his Bangladeshi counterpart, Ms. Hasina. It resulted in the exchange of enclaves, which were essentially pockets of land belonging to one country but surrounded by the territory of another, making those difficult to connect to the mainland.

Besides, India and Bangladesh have signed several agreements to enhance trade and economic cooperation to date. These agreements primarily focus on reducing trade barriers, improving infrastructure for trade, and promoting investment in each other's economies. Just after the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state, the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade was signed on March 19, 1972, which was renewed in 2015 and further revised on May 20, 2021, outlined the terms and conditions for the use of waterways in each other's territories for transit and trade. The first transit agreement between India and Bangladesh was signed in November 2010. In 2015, a bilateral protocol was signed between the governments of India and Bangladesh following the agreement. This protocol granted India permission to utilise four river ways in Bangladesh, facilitating connection between Kolkata and Murshidabad with Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya. However, the actual impact fell short of expectations, with only 13 cargo vessels utilising the route till 2020. In 2015, treaties were signed for the utilisation of Chittagong and Mongla ports, which had been the subject of Indian demands for several years. Following that, the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the transportation of goods from Chittagong and Mongla sea ports to Agartala (Tripura), Dawki (Meghalaya), Sutarkandi (Assam), and Srimantpur (Tripura) was signed in October 2018. This SOP specifies that the transportation will be carried out using road, rail, and waterways, with specific routes that include Akhaura for Agartala, Tamabil for Dawki, Sheola for

Sutarkandi, and Bibirbazar for Srimantpur. This implies that the landlocked states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura would have the opportunity to utilise open water routes via the Chittagong and Mongla ports.¹⁶ On the other hand, the Protocol allows Bangladesh to use Indian territories for trade with Nepal and Bhutan. This agreement has boosted regional trade and connectivity by providing landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan access to the sea through Bangladeshi and Indian territory.

During a meeting on September 26, 2018, the commerce ministers of India and Bangladesh reached consensus on the potential benefits of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) encompassing trade in goods, services, and investment. This agreement is seen as a means to strengthen trade and commerce relations between the two countries, considering Bangladesh's graduation from the Least Developing Countries (LDC) list in 2026 and its aim to become a middle-income state by 2041. India is currently Bangladesh's second-largest trading partner, after China. In the fiscal year 2022-23, Bangladesh's exports to India reached USD 2 billion, marking the first time to clock this level. Meanwhile, the official imports from India amounted to approximately USD 16 billion.¹⁷¹⁸

Water sharing has been a critical and often contentious issue between India and Bangladesh due to the shared trans-boundary river systems. While a comprehensive agreement on river water

¹⁶LightCastle Analytics Wing. (2022, July). *India Bangladesh Transit Treaty (Part I): The Costs and the Opportunities*. LightCastle Partners. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from <https://www.lightcastlebd.com/insights/2020/11/india-bangladesh-transit-treaty-part-i-the-costs-and-the-opportunities/>

¹⁷FAIR Team. (2023, February). India-Bangladesh CEPA Deal: A Critical Analysis. *Foreign Affairs Insights and Reviews (FAIR)*. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from <https://fairbd.net/india-bangladesh-cepa-deal-a-critical-analysis/#:~:text=will%20be%20affected%3F-.What%20is%20CEPA%3F,partnership%20between%20the%20two%20countries.>

¹⁸India-Bangladesh bilateral Relations. (2024). In *Ministry of External Relations, Government of India*. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Bangladesh-February-2024.pdf>

sharing is yet to be reached, there have been attempts to address water management of specific rivers. For example, the Ganges Water Treaty, signed on December 12, 1996, established the framework for sharing the waters of Ganges River between the two. Nevertheless, there is discontent in Bangladesh about water share it receives during the dry season while getting inundated during the monsoon by other 53 rivers that have basins defying the political boundaries. In fact, Teesta water is a boiling question in domestic politics of Bangladesh, and has remained a campaign issue in successive elections.

India and Bangladesh have cooperated in security matters, particularly in countering political extremism and terrorism on one another's soil. As turbulence in one country has spill-over effects on the other, information sharing and joint operations have been the basis of such cooperation. The 'Agreement on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking' was signed in 2010. The primary objectives of this initiative, as the name suggests, are to facilitate the exchange of intelligence, coordinate joint operations, and enhance cooperation among law enforcement agencies. The 'Bilateral Extradition Treaty' (2013) enables extradition of criminals and fugitives between India and Bangladesh; and promotes cooperation in addressing transnational crimes. The 'Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons' (2013) permits Indian and Bangladeshi citizens who have been found guilty of crimes in each other's soil to complete their sentences in their home country; to advance compassionate treatment to incarcerated individuals and support their process of rehabilitation.

Cultural exchanges have significantly matured the bonds of friendship between two countries due to their shared history and linguistic commonalities. There has been focus on promoting exchanges in various artistic fields such as music, theatre, art, painting, and literature. A bilateral 'Cultural Exchange Programme' (CEP) facilitates such exchanges, the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre

(IGCC) in Dhaka acts as the vehicle of promoting them. Through 2011-2012, both countries commemorated the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore and the 90th anniversary of '*Bidrohi*', a poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam. Bangladeshi nationals are eligible for various scholarships and training programs offered by initiatives and organisations such as ITEC, TCS of the Colombo Plan, ICCR, AYUSH, the Commonwealth, the SAARC, and the IORA. The Government of India has extended the *Muktijoddha* Scholarship Scheme to Higher Secondary-level students, offering 200 scholarships, and to Graduate-level students, offering 478 scholarships.¹⁹

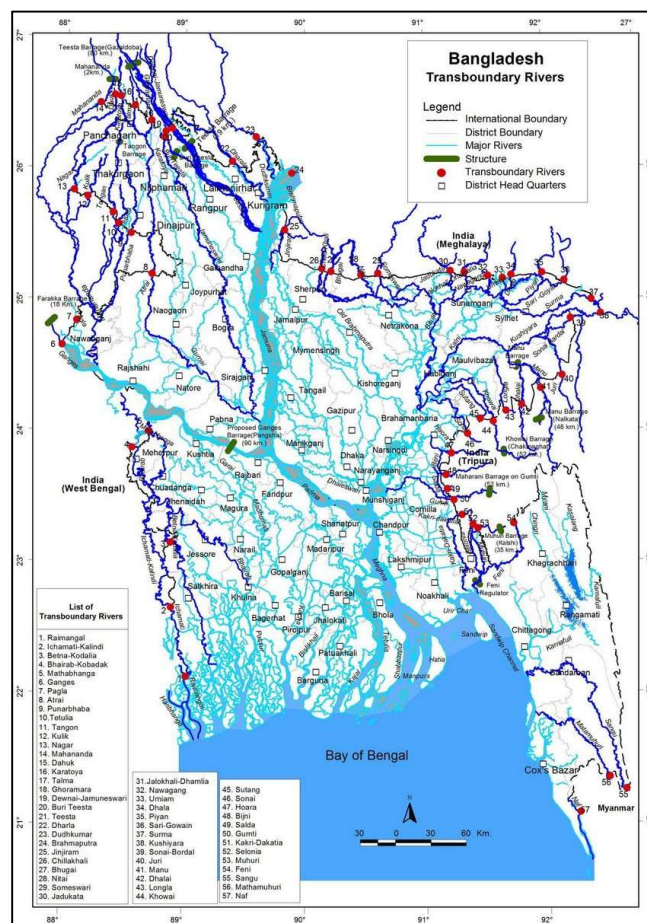
Apart from their bilateral ties, India and Bangladesh participate in regional and sub-regional cooperation through multilateral forums like the SAARC, the BIMSTEC, and the IORA. On the policy level, both countries have also agreed on working at sub-regional cooperation initiatives, such as the BBIN, also involving Nepal and Bhutan. India has committed millions of dollars in such projects in Bangladesh, as well as in Nepal and Bhutan; by extending credit lines and technical know-how, along with simple financial support minus conditions. Presently India is electrifying its entire broad-gauge railway network, which has made a large number of diesel locomotives out of service; and as a goodwill gesture, a good number of such operational locomotives have been handed over to Bangladesh.

2.3.3 Challenges Ahead

Though the eastern and north-eastern provinces of India, especially West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, are kind of organically connected with Bangladesh, bilateral relations between the two states are not free from friction. There are four areas that call for more attention than others.

¹⁹*India-Bangladesh Relations*. (2014, July). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bangladesh_July_2014_.pdf

First, the sharing of water of international rivers has been a recurring issue. There are 54 rivers that traverse through both countries before reaching their destinations. Out of them, only one, and the biggest, the Ganges is under an agreement for sharing of its water, especially during the dry season. After the commissioning of the Farakka Barrage in India in 1975, Bangladesh started raising the issue of not getting enough and just amount of water from the river. It also accused India of letting its water flow unhindered in the monsoon, causing floods downstream. After decades of discussions and negotiations, including at the Joint River Commission (JRC), an agreement was reached only in 1996. In the case of others, agreements are yet to be reached; the most notable among them is Teesta.



*Figure 5: Transboundary rivers of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
Source: Joint Rivers Commission-Bangladesh, Ministry of Water Resource, Government of Bangladesh.*

The construction of a barrage at Gazoldoba in India has resulted in a decrease in water flow from the Teesta during the dry season (November to May), dropping from average 5,000 cusecs to approx. 2,000 cusecs. As a result, the Teesta Barrage Irrigation Project in Dalia, Bangladesh, in the downstream, experienced significant setbacks. Bangladesh has raised this issue in multiple JRC meetings, but consensus could not be reached. Bangladeshi experts have suggested reserving 20 to 30 percent of Teesta River water during lean periods to maintain its ecological health while advocating for an equitable distribution of the remaining water among the two stakeholders. India suggested reserving 10 to 12 percent of the river's water and allocating the remaining amount based on the size of the catchment area, which is much larger in India. In 2013, an agreement was reached between the two countries on this prickly issue on principle, but due to strong opposition from the Government of West Bengal it could not see completion. Domestic political compulsions in India, thus, blocked the way of reaching a mutually acceptable division of water of Teetsa River. On the other hand, the same has been made a political issue in Bangladesh by the opposition parties. Recently, an agreement has been reached about the border river named Kushiya, but it is still a long way to go to establish a comprehensive river and basin management mechanism that India has with Pakistan for the Indus River system.²⁰

Second, there is the issue of border management. India and Bangladesh reached maritime and land boundary agreements in 2014 and 2015, respectively, thus marking an end to differences in interpretation about the borders. Almost 85 percent of the 4096 KM international border is now fenced, and enclaves have been exchanged. Still, there are serious concerns on both sides; especially with regard to the extremely local channels of communication near the border areas. It

²⁰Thakur, J. (2021, March 24). *India-Bangladesh Trans-Boundary River Management: Understanding the Tipaimukh Dam Controversy*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-trans-boundary-river-management-understanding-the-tipaimukh-dam-controversy-60419/>

is quite impossible to completely stop micro level but legal, informal exchanges as there are familial ties, casual trades, cultural festivals and periodical *simanata haats*, etc. These modes of exchange are deeply rooted in people's psyche and embedded in the local economy. The problem is, taking advantage of these informal arrangements, the exchange of illegal goods and smuggling are still thriving. Bangladesh believes that small arms and Phensedyl syrup are coming from India, and sometimes miscreants are taking shelter in bordering villages of India after committing crime in their land. India, on the other hand, is suffering from the smuggling of gold, marijuana, and other contraband products, as well as human trafficking.

The border terrains are so vastly different, starting from the mangroves of the Sundarbans to the hill tracts of Meghalaya or Tripura, that it is a monumental challenge to effectively guard the borders and at the same time keep traditional ways of exchange and communication open. With a Coordinated Border Management Plan signed between the heads of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) in July 2011, the casualties of men in uniform have dropped significantly; but the number of civilian deaths is still quite high.²¹

Third, the issue of trade imbalance works as an irritant in Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations. Though India offers Bangladesh an almost open access to Indian markets with no tariff barriers, the latter is yet to scale up trade and commerce with India to its targeted levels. Weathering the Covid-19 pandemic, trade between the two countries has reached USD 18 billion in the financial

²¹Deb, A. (2022). India and Bangladesh: A Multifaceted Relationship. *CLAWS Journal*, 15(1), 56–71. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/80425/ssoar-claws-2022-1-deb-India_and_Bangladesh_A_Multi.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-claws-2022-1-deb-India_and_Bangladesh_A_Multi.pdf

year 2022-23; but there is only USD 2 billion of Bangladeshi exports to India, while USD 16 billion worth of Indian goods and services reached Bangladeshi markets in the same period.²²

This huge deficit is economically unhealthy and politically unpleasant, especially for Bangladesh. India has planned to carry goods from its industrial core to its north-eastern states via the roads of Bangladesh, by using Bangladeshi ports as well as land border crossings in West Bengal. A trip from Kolkata to Agartala via Bangladesh takes approximately 12 hours and covers around 450 KM of road, while shipping the same goods through the Siliguri corridor and Assam takes more than two days and covers a stretch of almost 1500 KM. Still, the transporters prefer to use the second, longer road as it avoids the hassles of security checks at borders, customs, and a host of other logistical issues that practically take the same amount of time but require a lot more paperwork and government nods. Without smoothening of traffic to and from each other, and creating value chains among businesses like China did, this situation shall prevail, making a narrower margin for the Indian businesses and a loss of revenue for Bangladeshi transporters.

Fourth, India's current level of engagement with Bangladesh is heavily conditional on the ruling party, the Awami League. New Delhi has so far had very little to no success in engaging various other political stakeholders in Bangladeshi polity. In democracies, today's opposition is tomorrow's ruling party. In this respect, India's efforts and actions are quite unsuccessful.²³ The largest Opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and its political ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, do not have a history of cordial relations with New Delhi; in fact, during their last tenure, relations between the two capitals had nosedived. India nurtures a firm belief that the BNP-Jamaat Alliance

²²India-Bangladesh bilateral Relations. (2024). In *Ministry of External Relations, Government of India*. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Bangladesh-February-2024.pdf>

²³Bangladesh-India relations: Progress made and the Challenges Ahead. (2016, September 17). In *The Daily Star*. The Daily Star - IPAG Dialogue, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/bangladesh-india-relations-progress-made-and-the-challenges-ahead-1295740>

did, and if voted to power, it would again, support anti-India elements and anti-India activities in the bordering states of north-east. It is beyond the mandate and capacity of the Indian government to choose its preferred heads of government around it, and in that way, it is a diplomatic blunder to have such preconceived notions. Any discussion or negotiation with the current government needs to be carried to the Opposition table as well, via informal channels if necessary. Failing in that, the stability of India-Bangladesh relations has now become heavily reliant on the leadership of Sheikh Hasina; and any change in the political landscape of Dhaka could jeopardise India's long-term goals. China's involvement in South Asia was limited during the BNP's previous tenures in power. However, considering China's present standing in the region, if the BNP-Jamaat manage to regain power, there is a high chance that Dhaka would prioritise Beijing over New Delhi.²⁴

2.3.4 Latest Trends

At the official level, India's relation with Bangladesh is now on a solid footing, but developments in India's domestic political arena have every possibility of derailing them. The loud propaganda based on populist and majoritarian rhetoric often hurt sentiments in the neighbouring states. Campaign against the ruling Awami League in the recently concluded national election of Bangladesh was largely centred on its hobnobbing with India; and the Opposition alliance alleged that it was not bothered about the condition of Indian Muslims under the current regime in Delhi. The BNP argues that Dhaka has gained very little by surrendering its national interests to New Delhi while keeping a blind eye to the alleged atrocities against minorities in India. Same type of accusation pops up every now and then with regard to Teesta water. The stubbornness of the

²⁴Gambhir, M. (2022, September 12). *India-Bangladesh Relations: Conditional to a Sheikh Hasina Government?* South Asian Voices. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from <https://southasianvoices.org/india-bangladesh-relations-conditional-to-a-sheikh-hasina-government/>

Bengal government in not letting any bilateral understanding take shape with regard to Teesta negates every other gesture of friendship by the same government, and sends wrong signals to the neighbouring people. At present a vicious social media campaign is running in Bangladesh against the Hasina government that the Padma Setu, a national pride for Bangladeshis, is practically being handed over to New Delhi for ferrying cargo to its north-eastern states. Some quarters of hard-line elements have further gone ahead by charging that the bridge was made keeping Indian interests in mind. These types of malicious political campaigns, which might have support and funding from extra-regional stakeholders, may destabilise or unseat the Hasina government, and that will go against Indian interests. Therefore, India must be cautious about what message it is sending out.

China is investing heavily in Bangladesh, and very quickly it has crossed the volume of business that India does with it. Having created a value chain by collaborating with Bangladeshi businesses, China has been able to make economic ties more rooted than India. Despite the fact that India has the advantage of historical and civilisational linkages with the people of Bangladesh, that alone is not enough to counter the ever-growing Chinese influence. Moreover, Bangladesh has become a partner in the Chinese BRI, thus opening newer avenues for Beijing to access Bangladeshi society by building the social and economic infrastructure that Dhaka wants. The vaccine fiasco that India had got itself into during the Covid-19 pandemic did not portray the image of a reliable partner either. State to state contacts between Bangladesh and China is less concerning for India, but the way Beijing has successfully connected to the Bangladeshi society is something to be really worried about. Therefore, with enormous opportunities to grow together, India's relations with Bangladesh now present some serious challenges too.

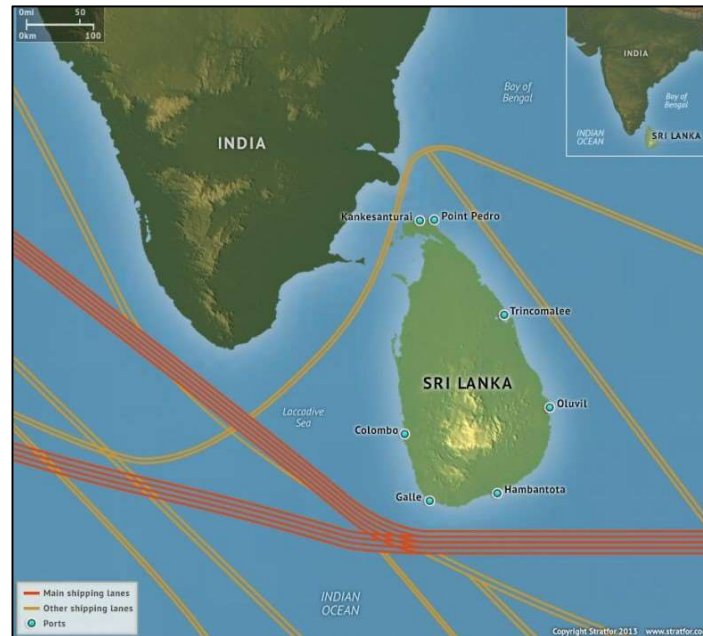
It will be pertinent to note here that in international forums Bangladesh has almost always been a friendly voice for India. As most of the controversial areas of bilateral ties are now either officially

addressed or in the process of resolution, there is a wider scope of partnering in such forums as well. Regional cooperation under SAARC has seen no progress since the 2014 Summit; and, to bridge the gap, platforms like BBIN took a significant role. In fact, many of the allegations by Bangladeshi Opposition parties can be addressed under such sub-regional platforms as there is more scope for India to give in terms of infrastructure, investment and technology, than to receive. These platforms have the additional benefit of being multilateral in nature, in a sense, cooperation in tangible developments like physical infrastructure under these forums where other states are also part, it is difficult to particularly point fingers at New Delhi accusing it of hegemonic intentions. Moreover, in multilateral ventures benefitting every stakeholder, the member states tend to remain more committed in joint efforts than in bilateral initiatives as those are prone to be influenced by other actors, more often than not by some extra-regional power, frequently.

2.4 India-Sri Lanka Relations

The history of India-Sri Lanka relations dates back to ancient times when trade and cultural exchanges flourished between the two places; and Buddhism served as the main linkage between the two very old civilisations. The maritime route between India and Sri Lanka has been a bustling trade corridor for centuries. In modern times, both countries came under British colonial rule and as a result shared a deeper connection, from administrative to political point of view. So much so that the two neighbours got independence from British rule consecutively in 1947 and 1948. The legacy of the colonial bonds laid down the foundation of diplomatic ties between the two newly independent states during the first decade or so. However, the situation started changing with the beginning of the nation building process in Sri Lanka, which chose an ethnic line with regard to citizenship and rights attached to it. As the ethnic issue took a violent turn in the shape of an all-

out rebellion and call for separation, India got entangled in that. India's involvement in the conflict, particularly the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), strained relations.



*Figure 6: International shipping lanes passing by Sri Lanka.
Source: RANE's Worldview*

From the very beginning, Sri Lanka was considered to be an important strategic space for independent India. Sri Lanka's geostrategic location has rendered it a pivotal gateway to the Indian Ocean. Despite a shared history spanning over two millennia, the post-independence bilateral relationship between India and Sri Lanka can be characterised as a power dynamic marked by asymmetry, apprehension, and distrust. To counterbalance India's regional predominance, Sri Lanka historically relied on security compacts, such as the Defence Agreement with Britain and Commonwealth ties. Nevertheless, the island nation's strategic and economic potential remained largely unrealised due to the protracted domestic ethnic conflict. India has adopted a multifaceted

approach to the ethnic issue, encompassing intervention, mediation, and third-party facilitation, yet a durable political resolution has thus far eluded the subcontinent.²⁵

2.4.1 India in the Ethnic Conflict of Sri Lanka

Dominance of Tamils of Indian origin over the economy and civil service, and the demographic consolidation of the Tamil community in the north, north-east and central parts of the country led to fear of losing Sinhala control in the state apparatus after independence. These Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka by the British administration and business class mainly to work as plantation labourers, during the 18th and 19th centuries. Within generations, these people took advantage of modern education introduced by the British and gained a solid footing in every sphere of economy; and with the British granting of voting rights to them in 1931, they were becoming a force in the political sphere as well. Fearing a Tamil supremacy in future Sri Lanka, the state disenfranchised them through the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, Standardisation of Education Policy of 1972 and the district quota introduced in 1974; all aimed at depriving the Tamil community of their rights through constitutional and legislative means. With the passing of one after one legislation to shrink the space for the Tamils in independent Sri Lanka, anti-state feelings were brewing among the Tamils; and violence against the community in 1956, 1958, and 1974, only consolidated the support base of militant Tamil groups. Sri Lanka's political volatility of that time was reflected in the constitutional changes of 1972; and by 1978, to soothe the majority

²⁵Mallempati, S. (2022). Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009. In *Sapru House Paper* (1st ed.). Indian Council of World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>

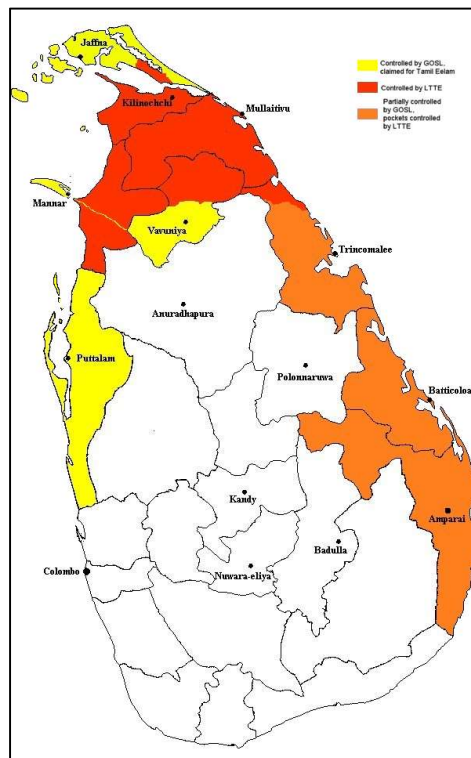
sentiment, the state had given a foremost place to Buddhism and the Sinhala language, and turned Sri Lanka into a unitary state.

The developments with regard to the Tamils in Sri Lanka had a direct effect in India as these people were taken to Sri Lanka from the southern state of Tamil Nadu; and many of them had familial ties with their Indian counterparts, let alone the sentimental connection. The Lankan citizenship act of 1948 and subsequent acts reaffirming that legal position on citizenship rendered Indian origin Tamils almost stateless. This created a point of contention between India and Sri Lanka, as India sought to protect the rights of ethnic Tamils. Tamil Nadu, especially, took a keen interest in the issue; and, politicians across the spectrum as well as civil society were vociferous for protection of Tamil people's right to live with dignity in Sri Lanka. This exposed New Delhi to a unique challenge of balancing foreign relations with a neighbour and a domestic political demand, which would have an impact on the electoral fate of the rulers in Delhi.

With ethnic politics in Sri Lanka gaining traction, New Delhi and Colombo first tried to settle the issue amicably, without disappointing their respective constituencies. One such example was the Sirima-Shastri Pact (after the names of the Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka and India, Sirimavo Bandarnaike and Lal Bahadur Shastri), signed in 1964, which provided for repatriation and resettlement of ethnic Tamils in Tamil Nadu. India gave citizenship to more than six lakh Lankan Tamils and Sri Lanka granted citizenship to about 7.5 lakh Tamils there. However, the progress made in building up trust was altered by the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. It had repercussions in Tamil Nadu and spill-over effects in larger southern India, and made New Delhi to act to calm down the domestic uproar.²⁶ A number of other issues, such as the management of Kachchativu Island, fishing rights in the Palk Straits, etc. further deteriorated the Indo-Lanka

²⁶Ibid.

relations during this time. By the mid-1980s, Sri Lanka was taken over by a full-fledged civil war, and India was facing a critical challenge of protecting the non-combatant ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka, while maintaining ties with Colombo. The majority perception about India there was of an agent provocateur; and on the other hand, the minority Tamils expected ‘more’ from it.



*Figure 7: Sri Lankan map depicting different zones controlled by the government and the LTTE (in 1986).
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

Being the regional powerhouse, it was not desirable for India to have an unstable Sri Lanka in the backyard; especially when the instability had links to it and had massive domestic reaction from its southern provinces. With the rapid rise of the LTTE, the Lankan security forces were in shambles, and the state of Sri Lanka was on the verge of collapse in the northern peninsula. Amidst this overall chaos, India felt compelled to intervene and opted for a military action in the form of dropping food and medicines in the epicentre of the rebel activities, Jaffna. In 1987, it brokered

the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, also known as the Rajiv-Jayewardene Accord, which aimed to address the Tamil issue by providing for greater autonomy for the Tamil-majority areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. As part of the accord, New Delhi deployed the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to enforce the agreement. However, the IPKF operation was fraught with challenges, including clashes with the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups. Also, this Indian intervention was seen as an infringement on its sovereignty by some parts of the Lankan government, and the general Sinhalese population at large. The ethnic Tamils who had rallied behind Prabhakaran and his LTTE, felt that India, in an effort to bring back peace in its neighbourhood, washed its hands off their cause. Thus, India got trapped in a political crossfire, and it adversely impacted its relations with Sri Lanka in the decades to come. Even though the Indo-Lanka Accord failed to achieve the immediate objectives, there is no doubt about it, for the first time, outlined in detail the path to a possible long-term solution of the core problem, keeping interests of both the signatories and the Tamil community in mind.²⁷

After assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister whose government had signed the 1987 Accord, by the Tamil guerrillas subscribing to the LTTE cause, in 1991, India's approach to the issue dramatically changed. Though the IPKF had already been withdrawn in 1990, a lesson was learnt from this brutal suicide attack, and New Delhi dissuaded itself from any more active intervention. The way India used to see the LTTE, as the representative of the Lankan Tamil voice, was changed too. New Delhi encouraged Colombo to find a lasting political solution to the ethnic issue with the help of foreign mediation, and Norway came forward to assume that responsibility. From then on, till 2009, the year the LTTE was finally and comprehensively defeated by the

²⁷Indo-Lanka Accord. (n.d.). In *UN Peacemaker*. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN%20LK_870729_Indo-Lanka%20Accord.pdf

Lankan state, India's role was passive and it spent a lot of time and energy in repairing the ties with Sri Lanka, by giving precedence to the officially elected governments in Colombo over any other stakeholder or voice in the island country.²⁸

Since 2009, India seemed to have five specific political objectives while dealing with Sri Lanka, which are- rebuilding the devastated northern and eastern provinces of it, containing spill-over effects of the war, managing reactions in Tamil Nadu, stopping any direct international involvement in Sri Lanka in the name of reconciliation process, and, finally and most importantly, bringing the ruling government and Tamil political parties to the negotiation table to find a way to get over the civil war and reach a political agreement. It emphasised on the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution for finding a lasting solution which would guarantee perpetual peace among the ethnic communities. It strongly advocated for dialogue between the government and all other stakeholders to find a way ahead within the framework of a united Sri Lanka, as stated by the Amendment. Meanwhile, it remained careful in reacting to the UN reports on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka to avoid any possible international action, sponsored by the West. There was an implicit concern that any assertions by India might have implications on bilateral relations.

While pushing for such a nuanced reconciliation, New Delhi could not overlook the sentiments in Chennai. Successive governments in Tamil Nadu had raised the issue of Lankan Tamils' plight in post-war Sri Lanka with the governments in New Delhi. In fact, the then ruling party in Tamil Nadu, the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), being an important ally of the ruling UPA coalition in Delhi, had persuaded the central government to vote against Sri Lanka in the UN in 2011 and 2013. The main opposition in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida

²⁸Mallempati, S. (2022). *Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009* (1st ed.). Indian Council for World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>

Munnetra Kazhagam), had also gone the same path as their arch-rival DMK. Colombo responded to these Indian overtures in two ways, one, by continuously deepening its strategic ties with China, and second, on the domestic front, by setting up of ‘Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission’ (LLRC) which recommended noteworthy steps towards reconciliation and investigation into the alleged human rights violations.²⁹

2.4.2 Economic Relations

The economic partnership between India and Sri Lanka has experienced significant growth and expansion over the years. The implementation of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) in 2000 greatly facilitated the growth of bilateral trade between the two neighbours. Studies have found that this agreement helped Sri Lanka greatly to upscale its exports, but it has yet to reach full potential due to the lack of supply capacity on its part along with some problems related to market access in India.³⁰ India has historically been the largest trading partner of Sri Lanka, while Sri Lanka remains to be the second largest of India’s in the South Asian region. In the financial year of 2023-24, Indian exports to Sri Lanka stood at approx. USD 4.1 billion, while imports were of a value of approx. USD 1.4 billion.³¹³² In 2022, Indian exports to Sri Lanka accounted for more than a quarter of its total imports.³³ India is also the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment in Sri Lanka. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka estimated that the cumulative FDI

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Kelegama, S. (2014). The India–Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and the proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement: A closer look. In *Asian Development Bank* (No. 458). Asian Development Bank Institute. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156313/adbi-wp458.pdf>

³¹*Export Import Data Bank*. (n.d.). Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://tradedstat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/centq.asp>

³²*Export Import Data Bank*. (n.d.). Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://tradedstat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/icnt.asp>

³³*Sri Lanka*. (n.d.). Indian Trade Portal. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.indiantradeportal.in/vs.jsp?lang=0&id=0,25,45,916,26638,28413>

from India had exceeded USD 2.2 billion by 2021. In that year too, with USD 142 million in investment, India topped the chart. Indian investments in Sri Lanka are primarily focused on capital goods and services; including petroleum retail, tourism and hotels, manufacturing, real estate, telecommunications, and banking and financial services.³⁴

Tourism is a thriving industry in Sri Lanka and one of the biggest sources of foreign exchange. India is the largest source market of this sector; accounting for 29% and 17% of total tourist inflows to the island nation in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Sri Lankans are also among the top ten visitors to India. To facilitate the sector, India and Sri Lanka had entered into an Open Sky Agreement in 2016, which enabled the Sri Lankan airlines to operate unlimited flights to and from six Indian cities. The Buddhist religious circuits are particularly popular among the Lankan people. To further ease hassles, visa on arrival and e-visa regimes have been established.³⁵ Tourism and commerce, thus, play a pivotal role in strengthening people-to-people contacts between the two.

2.4.3 Development Cooperation between India and Sri Lanka

Since the beginning of its journey as independent states, India has been one of the major, and most closely connected, development partners of Sri Lanka. In fact, this developmental cooperation has been a major pillar of the overall bilateral relations between the two. India's overall financial

³⁴Press Information Bureau (PIB). (2023, November 1). *India and Sri Lanka re-launch negotiations of the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA)* [Press release]. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1973859>

³⁵*India- Sri Lanka Relations*. (2021, July 1). High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Retrieved October 16, 2023, from <https://hcicolombo.gov.in/pages?id=eyJpdjI6Iit0TjFpQ3VOYyBjZm1DN0FaSGpaekE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoibU9kQ3lPdGd6aTE0VWtWM2hTWXhiUT09IiwibWFjIjoim2Y0ZWZhYjUyYTI0ZDgzMjMzMzg5ZmY3NTM0MjcZNGQ5YTQ3NjdlMjI1ZGJkOGYwZjM5YjFiMTJjZmM4OTUyMSJ9&subid=eyJpdjI6IiVpdEVUamd1YmpjOEUzaGE2SDdGalE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoisGQzZVdnSVVaM08rMHo3Tm1LVUZwZz09IiwibWFjIjoim2Y0ZWZhYjUyYTI0ZDgzMjMzMzg5ZmY3NTM0MjcZNGQ5YTQ3NjdlMjI1ZGJkOGYwZjM5YjFiMTJjZmM4OTUyMSJ9>

commitment to Sri Lanka now exceeds USD 3.5 billion, of which only grants components touch USD 600 million. The grants projects cut across sectors such as housing, healthcare, education, industrial infrastructure development etc. In the aftermath of the devastating ethnic civil war, New Delhi proposed construction of 50,000 houses in the war-torn areas and for plantation labourers of remote northern areas, with a financial commitment to the tune of INR 1372 crore. This was so far the largest grants programme by the Government of India in a foreign land. By now, it has exceeded the commitment by making 62,500 homes for Lankan people with a far extended budget allocation. At a total cost of USD 22.5 million, India has established a country-wide 1990 Emergency Ambulance Service; starting in phases from 2016. It has also handed over the 150-bed Dickoya Hospital to the Lankan people. In addition to that, a 1500-strong auditorium, named after Rabindranath Tagore, with all modern amenities has been built and handed over to the largest public university of Sri Lanka, Ruhuna University, at Matara. In total, more than 20 grants projects funded by New Delhi are currently in different phases of completion in Sri Lanka.

One of the major glues for people-to-people connection between India and Sri Lanka is Buddhism; and, of late, this connection has been given adequate focus by New Delhi. The sacred relics of Lord Buddha, found in Kapilavasthu in 1970, have been on public display in Sri Lanka twice; and this has generated visitors to the tune of millions. In 2020, during a virtual summit meeting, the Government of India had announced a grant assistance of USD 15 million for the promotion of Buddhist ties between the two nations. India also upgraded the status of Kushinagar Airport in Uttar Pradesh to an international airport to host pilgrims from across the world, with the inaugural flight coming in from Sri Lanka. In Colombo, the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre, under the Indian High Commission, has been playing a key role in building bridges of cultural exchange for the last couple of decades. To match these close cultural linkages, the Government of India is now

offering more than 700 scholarship slots to Lankan students for higher studies in India. New Delhi also organises training programs, residential workshops etc. for Lankan government officials. Continuing this gesture of friendship, Lankan students are even allowed to sit for NEET and IIT-JEE from the 2017-2018 academic year to pursue a career in medicine and engineering respectively. To fast-track the development and infrastructure ventures, India has extended 11 Lines of Credit to Sri Lanka in the last 15 years. The sectors covered by the LoCs by the EXIM Bank of India include railway, road transport, connectivity, defence, and green energy.³⁶

2.4.4 The Chinese Inroad

Over the years, China has become an important partner of Sri Lanka, both economically and politically. China clearly intends to use Sri Lanka's geostrategic advantages to further its dominance in the Indian Ocean region, in exchange of economic concessions under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese assistance is given to Sri Lanka in line with the Strategic Cooperation Partnership Agreement (SCPA), signed in 2014, during Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to the country. Supplementing this, Colombo and Beijing are also negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since some time now. In a desperate attempt to rebuild the post-war economy by attempting to emerge as an economic hub in the Indian Ocean region, Colombo had gone ahead to engage deeply with Beijing; somewhat ignoring sensitivities of the regional power and neighbour, India. A number of infrastructure projects ranging from ports, roads and railways to the renewable energy sector in Sri Lanka have been funded by China, through state financial institutions such as the Exim Bank of China. The Colombo Port, Hambantota Port and the

³⁶Ibid.

Hambantota Port Industrial Zone, which was leased for 99 years and the Colombo Port City are considered to be important BRI investments.³⁷

India remains concerned about two key issues regarding China's involvement in Sri Lanka: the lack of transparency in project implementation and the potential dual use of ports for both civilian and military purposes. Despite Sri Lanka's repeated assurances that it will never go against India's security interests in the region, these concerns persist. These apprehensions were heightened when a Chinese surveillance ship docked at Hambantota Port, leased out to China in August 2022, reaffirming the Chinese 'String of Pearls' strategy against India.³⁸

In the backyard of the regional power India, inviting the Chinese BRI through a series of projects was definitely a Sri Lankan message for India and other international powers such as the US, which had shown concern about the island nation's post-war reconciliation process and human rights records. There is no point in believing that Colombo did not know how these projects could eventually bind it in a debt trap and could extract concessions in the form of debt-equity swap, thereby putting its sovereignty at stake. In fact, the extra-jurisdictional nature of the Chinese Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Sri Lanka is a clear indication to that effect. Still, Sri Lanka chose to go ahead with these. The Rajapaksas, in their two terms in power since 2009, have shown clear inclination of going with China for both internal and external reasons. Externally, they expected Chinese help in revamping the Lankan economy devastated by decades-long civil war. More important is the internal factor though, as they sought to build up a solid support base for their regime by showing off projects sponsored by Beijing. Rajapaksas knew very well that they

³⁷Mallempati, S. (2022). *Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009* (1st ed.). Indian Council for World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>

³⁸Abeyagoonasekera, A. (2021, June 22). *How China won over local agency to shackle Sri Lanka using a port city*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-china-won-over-local-agency-to-shackle-sri-lanka-using-a-port-city/>

were not going to receive even a bit of support from Tamil nationalist parties or the people of the north; as a result, they had to consolidate the Sinhalese vote bank by cashing on in the success in the war against the LTTE coupled with a promise of economic growth. To that end, their regime had systematically favoured and helped grow a public opinion which suspected any Indian, or for that matter western, like that of the US, involvement in economic ventures; while embracing Chinese investment.³⁹⁴⁰

This Chinese tilt had clearly helped Gotabaya Rajapaksa win the 2019 presidential election. Knowing his strengths and weaknesses, he campaigned for economic growth wrapped in Sinhala pride in the Sinhalese dominated regions only. The same SLPP coalition, which had successfully spread fear amongst the public over the US project MCC or Indian proposal of developing Trincomalee port as a threat to sovereignty, had used China's Colombo Port City project to secure a domestic political victory upon passing the bill. Two factors precisely forced the Lankan government to pass the Port City legislation within a month. First, Sri Lanka's economic situation, which was already in bad shape, had severely worsened with the pandemic. The country's foreign reserve and forex inflow hit the bottom and debt servicing became extremely difficult with a whopping external debt amounting to USD 35.3 billion by August, 2020. Second, it needed the crucial unambiguous Chinese support against the UNHRC resolution that sought to look into human rights violations during the civil war days by international bodies.⁴¹ Thus, political security of the regime converged with economic security of the state, as perceived by the Rajapaksas, made Colombo come closer to Beijing during this period.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Mallempati, S. (2022). *Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009* (1st ed.). Indian Council for World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>

⁴¹Abeyagoonasekera, A. (2021, June 22). *How China won over local agency to shackle Sri Lanka using a port city*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-china-won-over-local-agency-to-shackle-sri-lanka-using-a-port-city/>

2.4.5 Current Trends

Historically, India's security concerns regarding China's involvement in Sri Lanka, disagreements over the fishing sector, and the continued challenge of ethnic reconciliation have hindered the progress of bilateral economic cooperation. However, when Sri Lanka's economy fell into an economic crisis in April 2022 and defaulted on its international debt, India played a critical role, reaffirming its commitment to 'Neighbourhood First' policy, by providing the island nation with USD 4 billion in foreign aid.⁴² Amidst Sri Lanka's unfolding economic crisis and resultant political chaos, India emerged as a key player not only by providing crucial emergency financial aid, but also with essential supplies such as food, oil and medicine. Indian concerns were at peak till former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was perceived to have a leaning towards China, was in chair; but this persisted even after Wickremesinghe assumed office, following the domestic upheaval in the aftermath of the financial crisis.⁴³ The 2022 economic crisis provided India with an opportunity to iron out the friction points to a major extent. The way India intervened and gave traction to the alliance government in sailing out of the immediate repercussions of the crisis had helped in regaining its centrality to a great extent, both among the political elites and general public. In fact, the crisis showed the indispensability of India in South Asian affairs to other neighbours as well. The year 2022 is considered to be a watershed moment in the Indo-Lanka relations as it marked a new beginning in bilateral ties, and also significantly restored the balance of regional power dynamics, which tilted heavily towards China under the Rajapaksas. A combination of factors including decades of armed ethnic conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine War, bad

⁴²Wignaraja, G., &Kripalani, M. (2023, August 2). *India and Sri Lanka lay the ground work for closer economic ties*. East Asia Forum. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/08/02/india-and-sri-lanka-lay-the-groundwork-for-closer-economic-ties/>

⁴³Rajagopalan, R. P. (2023, August 7). *Sri Lankan President visits India, highlights close relations*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/sri-lankan-president-visits-india-highlights-close-relations/>

economic policy decisions made by successive governments, tax cuts to the rich, and a hasty transition towards organic farming—all have contributed to the economic mess which forced Sri Lanka to default on its USD 53 billion foreign debt and to declare bankruptcy. In contrast to India's consistent response to the crisis, China opted to observe and assess the situation before offering humanitarian aid amounting to a meagre USD 76 million, in response to Colombo's appeal for a USD 4 billion emergency aid. Sri Lanka has a debt of approximately USD 2 billion to China, with China's total investments in Sri Lanka estimated at USD 8 billion. Despite the Lankan government's request, Beijing did not show any intention of debt restructuring as well.⁴⁴ This cold attitude from China came as a shock to the Lankan people. New Delhi, naturally, did not hesitate to capitalise on this perception building up in the island nation to further cement its image as a reliable, all-weather friend. In addition, when Sri Lanka sought assistance from the IMF, India promptly expressed its support for debt restructuring by sending a letter.⁴⁵ All these took Indo-Lanka relations back on track to a major extent, like it was during the Wickremesinghe-Sirisena government of the last decade.

The Rajapaksas' bias and dependence on China also blocked any meaningful engagement between India and Sri Lanka in the regional multilateral platforms. SAARC has remained dormant for the last one decade; and other regional and sub-regional forums that the two countries share, like the SASEC or the BIMSTEC, are filled with members more or less in the same position as Sri Lanka with regard to China and its debt-driven investments. In fact, the Lankan financial crisis came as a lesson to most of these regional states and there is a visible, renewed enthusiasm about India

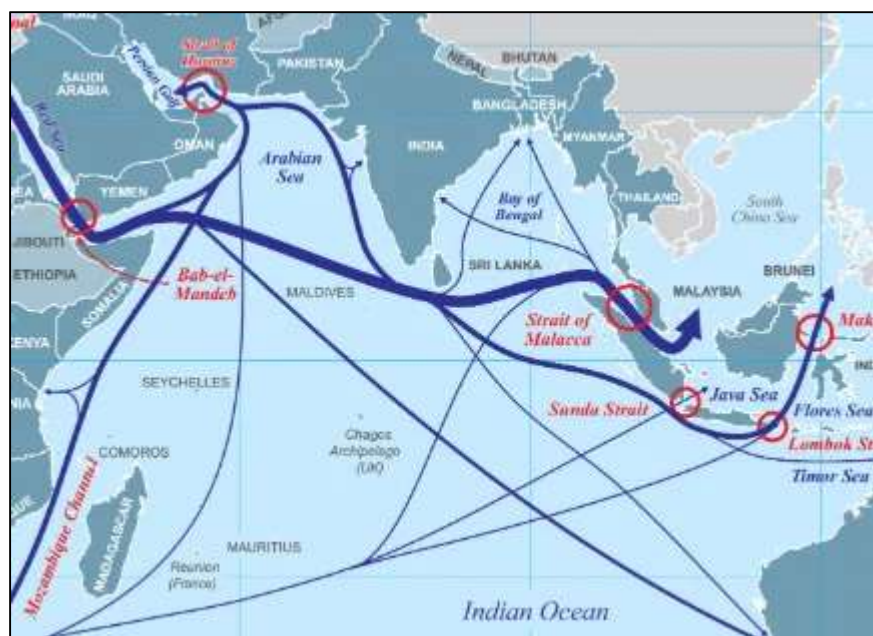
⁴⁴Mallempati, S. (2022). *Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009* (1st ed.). Indian Council for World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>

⁴⁵Cogan, M. S. (2023, July 31). India's Foreign Policy Progress in Sri Lanka is a Strategic Setback for China. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/indias-foreign-policy-progress-in-sri-lanka-is-a-strategic-setback-for-china/>

among these states. It is probably the best time for New Delhi to give fresh efforts towards the BIMSTEC as except for Pakistan, all other states in South Asia seem to be seriously looking for an alternative avenue than the Chinese road to development. The Indo-Lanka free trade regime has been immensely successful, as we have already noted, and India's role in the financial crisis has proven both its capability and intention at the time of emergency. Naturally, this can be the model for economic cooperation at the sub-regional level. In the case of Bangladesh also, we have seen, physical connectivity is given highest priority in expectation of future political cooperation. Such a liberally drawn and mutually beneficial economic partnership model at larger scale might bring results for all the parties without shackling their sovereignty.

2.5 India-Maldives Relations

India and Maldives have a long history of strong connections in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, religion, and trade. The relations have been characterised by a strong sense of cordiality, often disturbed by political upheavals, and it is quite multi-dimensional in nature. India promptly acknowledged Maldives' independence in 1965, and established diplomatic ties with the island nation. The Maldives' close proximity to India, with Minicoy island just 70 nautical miles away and India's mainland along its west coast 300 nautical miles away, accords it great strategic importance for India. This critical position further consolidates due to its location, which is directly opening to the international commercial sea lanes on the Indian Ocean. India's footprint, as the biggest and closest neighbour, can be seen in every sphere of the Maldives; be it political, economic, social or cultural.



*Figure 8: Strategic location of Maldives on the Indian Ocean.
Source: India Foundation*

Interestingly, Maldives is the only neighbour with which India does not have any boundary issues. The issue of Maldives' claim to Minicoy island was resolved through the Maritime Boundary Treaty of 1976, by which Maldives officially recognised Minicoy as an integral part of India. This absence of any permanent irritant in bilateral relations has made it mostly upward moving, minus a few short intervals. During the strongman Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's thirty years' control over the island state, the relations solidified for various reasons. When he was ten years into office, a coup was organised against Gayoom, in 1988, and he had to take New Delhi's help to thwart it. The Indian mission had returned home as soon as the objective was attained, without interfering in political settlements after successfully deterring the coup. This action had established India as a trusted friend, after initial misgivings that Gayoom had. This special position was further cemented with India's help to Maldives after the devastating tsunami of 2004, and during acute water crisis

in 2014. As we have mentioned, obviously there have been brief periods of political differences, but those never escalated to the level of a conflict ever.⁴⁶

2.5.1 ‘India Factor’ in Maldivian Politics

Like all other South Asian neighbours, India has remained a factor and a poll plank in Maldivian politics. This has become more apparent after the democratisation of Maldives in 2008. Another distinguishing feature of Maldivian politics is that it is strongly personality-centric and very prone to swing. The authoritarian rule of Gayoom was overthrown after a long movement for establishment of democracy under the leadership of Mohamed Nasheed, in 2008. Nasheed, the founder of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), became the first democratically elected president. Though he left his mark in many a field, most importantly in environment and climate change, he was ousted from power on the charges of being anti-Islam; and following a tussle with the judiciary, in 2012. His deputy, the Vice President, Md. Waheed Hassan took charge and continued for the rest of the term, till 2013; only to pass the baton to the Opposition leader Abdulla Yameen of People’s Party of Maldives (PPM), a half-brother Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who successfully formed a coalition against Nasheed and his MDP. Nasheed and the MDP had, since beginning, maintained a warm relationship with New Delhi and had been quite vocal about an ‘India First’ policy. On the contrary, Yameen campaigned highlighting the same and touted MDP’s proximity to India as a submission of sovereignty.

After tightening his grip on power, the Yameen administration charged Nasheed with terrorism and sent him to jail in 2015. The shady charges and manhandling of a senior politician of the

⁴⁶*India-Maldives Bilateral Relations*. (2022). High Commission of India to Male. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://hci.gov.in/male/?pdf1185?000>

stature of Nasheed was criticised by the international community, including India. New Delhi appealed to Male to take proper legal recourse, if there were any serious charges against the former president. The Yameen administration had refused to react to such requests, and as a diplomatic response Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi skipped Maldives during the four nation Indian Ocean tour of March 2015.⁴⁷ Although Nasheed was later cleared of all charges, nonetheless he was barred from contesting in future elections.

India expressed its reservations to Yameen's actions in many cases, most notably to the imposition of an emergency in 2018. The disagreements between the two neighbours starting since his taking of office significantly strained the bilateral relationship. In a counter diplomatic gesture, Yameen signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China in 2017, encouraged Chinese businesses to participate in several significant projects, including the Friendship Bridge and housing projects on Hulhumale Island, and aired threats of driving out Indian servicemen and pilots from the islands. In 2018, New Delhi clearly showed a sense of relief when Yameen was defeated and Ibrahim Solih, a close ally of Nasheed, emerged as the front-runner in the election. India was encouraged to begin several infrastructure projects, including a USD 500 million Greater Male Connectivity Project, which is financed by grants and concessionary loans from India. Over time, Solih came to be even more cordial than Nasheed. Under Solih, the UTF (Uthuru Thila Falhu) Island Project was signed in 2021, with construction commencing soon after. The project includes India's construction and maintenance of a coastguard harbour and dockyard with modern radar systems in the atoll close to Male. The opposition parties in Maldives labelled this agreement as an encroachment on

⁴⁷Manoharan, N. (2017, June 28). *India-Maldives Relations: A Tale of Two Concerns*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5311

its sovereignty by India as they believed this would be India's naval base in disguise; and they started the 'India Out' campaign keeping an eye on the 2023 presidential election.⁴⁸

2.5.2 Trade and Economic Cooperation with the Maldives

India and Maldives had signed a trade agreement back in 1981 which laid down the mechanism for supply of essential commodities to the island nation. Starting from a very low bilateral trade volume, since then, it came up to approx. USD 289 million in 2022; where Indian exports stood at approx. USD 280 million and import at approx. USD 9 million.⁴⁹ Cargo vessel services between the two states had been inaugurated in September 2020, which had provided a further boost to the trade figures in the last few years. New Delhi also extended three Lines of Credit from February 2021 which also had a positive impact on the rising volume in trade. Many Indian public corporations and private ventures are playing a significant role both in bilateral trade as well as in growth of Maldivian economy. For example, State Bank of India has been providing loans to ventures in the fields of island resorts, marine product exports, etc. since 1978.

Economy of Maldives is heavily dependent on tourism, and this sector is the source of much of foreign exchange and government revenues. Directly, it contributes 25% of Maldivian GDP; but indirectly, if job creation and allied industries are considered, it is the source of income for a third quarter of Maldives' population. After a devastating blow to the hospitality industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, India emerged as the top source of tourists in 2021 and 2022. The

⁴⁸Haidar, S. (2023, October 6). *Worldview with Suhasini Haidar | Muizzu's win | How will it impact India-Maldives relations?* [Video]. The Hindu. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/worldview-with-suhasini-haidar-muizzus-win-how-will-it-impact-india-maldives-relations/article67388872.ece>

⁴⁹*India (IND) and Maldives (MDV) trade*. (n.d.). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/mdv>

Chinese and the Europeans used to be the largest source of visitors, but India has taken that spot in the post-pandemic scenario. An open sky agreement and facilities like visa-on-arrival are providing a real push in that direction. There are about 27,000 Indian expatriates in the Maldives, including a sizable number of medical professionals, nurses, paramedics, teachers, and unskilled labourers in addition to other professionals and the business sector. Approximately 125 of the 400 doctors in the nation are Indian; and, there is also a significant presence of Indian paramedics. Approximately 25% of teachers in Maldives are of Indian nationality. Out of the approximately 1700 foreign teachers in the country, around 95% are Indians.⁵⁰

2.5.3 Indian Concerns in Maldives

Apart from political instability and India being used as a political tool for electioneering, New Delhi currently has two more specific concerns with regard to Male. First, on the security front, it is about radicalisation of a section of Maldivian youth. With the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in some parts of West Asia, a good number of young men were attracted towards the path of religious fundamentalism. More than 200 Maldivian men were reported to be fighting under the IS banner in the last one decade. Hundreds have been found to be returning from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia after completion of religious training in madrassas. Not only international factors, but domestic political scenario was also ripe for such a development, as to ouster Nasheed and keep his MDP away from power, Yameen and his party PPM did not hesitate to use religion during the last decade; and that infusion of religion into politics has now become more rampant. New Delhi fears these *jihad* and madrasa returnees may be used by anti-India elements to create instability in India,

⁵⁰*India-Maldives Bilateral Relations*. (2022). High Commission of India to Male. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://hci.gov.in/male/?pdf1185?000>

especially in the southern state of Kerala, which also has been found to be a recruitment ground of the Islamic State (IS) outfit.⁵¹

India's second source of anxiety comes from a strategic viewpoint, and it is regarding China. The Maldives has apparently emerged as another pearl in China's perceived 'String of Pearls' strategy of encircling India along the maritime borders. Beijing has long been exploring a naval base in the Indian Ocean region facing the major international sea lanes on which its energy supplies are moved, and considering the Maldives' location and its tiny economy depending almost exclusively on tourism, there is, undoubtedly, no better option. In 2014, Maldives became a partner in China's ambitious Maritime Silk Route project, while Xi Jinping was on a visit to Male. To facilitate Chinese enterprises, the Maldives had also amended its constitution in 2015, which allowed foreign entities to own lands, satisfying some preconditions.⁵²

In spite of the strong ties between India and Maldives, China, a significant foreign investor in Maldives, managed to gain favour with the previous government led by Abdulla Yameen, who served as president from 2013 to 2018. The Chinese company Beijing Urban Construction Group was awarded the USD 800 million contract for developing the main international airport of the island chain in Male, replacing the Indian company GMR. It's true that the GMR episode was fraught with a series of bad decisions and delay in implementation on India's part; nevertheless, this particular incident was actually a pointer to the government's shift in priorities towards China. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been stimulated by such contracts, which reinforced China's stake and claim in the Indian Ocean

⁵¹Manoharan, N. (2017, June 28). *India-Maldives Relations: A Tale of Two Concerns*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5311

⁵²Ibid.

region.⁵³ During the Yameen administration, there was a significant increase in Chinese economic and infrastructural investments across multiple sectors of the country; but like every other destination of Chinese investment, it carried along a huge Chinese debt burden as well. As of the end of 2023, the Maldives owed China about USD 1.4 billion, which amounted to 40% of its total foreign debt.⁵⁴

2.5.4 Current Trends

India's bilateral relations with Maldives saw several ups and downs in recent times, and more often than not it depended on the incumbent in power in Male. India being the closest neighbour and a regional power, it is impossible for any ruling party or coalition in Male to ignore New Delhi in their foreign policy framework; and with the Modi regime's active engagement in the neighbourhood under the 'Neighbourhood First' policy it has become even more difficult. Therefore, be it a pro-China government under Abdulla Yameen or pro-India ones under Mohamed Nasheed and Ibrahim Solih, India remained a key player in Maldivian affairs. In 2022, President Solih reiterated his commitment to an 'India First' policy in response to India's 'Neighbourhood First' doctrine, and while travelling to India, reassured to remain sensitive to India's security concerns in the Indian Ocean region. He also emphasised India's role in being an all-weather friend as well as net security provider to Maldives in the geo-strategic realm of South Asia and larger international security arrangement. China managed to gain a major footprint in the islands under

⁵³Ahmed, S. N. (2023, June 6). *Enriching the Defence Contours of India-Maldives Relations*. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Enriching-the-Defence-Contours-of-India-Maldives-Relations-NSAhmed-060623>

⁵⁴Pasricha, A. (2024, February 9). *IMF flags BRI partner Maldives' high debt*. Voice of America. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/imf-flags-bri-partner-maldives-high-debt/7480862.html>

Solih's predecessor Yameen during 2013-2018 period in terms of significant investments in infrastructure, but that does not alter the reality of India's pre-eminence.⁵⁵

Being a tiny island nation with a small population, Maldives is heavily dependent on the trilateral security arrangement among India, Sri Lanka and itself. This tripartite maritime arrangement seeks to address common threats such as illicit drug and human trafficking, illegal fishing and piracy to name some; and Maldives is practically a junior partner in this, relying almost totally on the other two. Having very little cultivable land, Maldives' food security is also dependent on the ocean and the two neighbours. It is also to be noted that foreign exchange of Maldives comes from mainly two sources, one is tourism and the other is from export of sea-food such as Tuna; and for this Maldives need to protect its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and far-flung islands from unauthorised activities. For this too, it relies heavily on India and Sri Lanka. Also, Indian tourists have surpassed the number of Chinese and European tourists in 2020, becoming the main source of income from hospitality industries. Apart from these economic compulsions, Maldives' citizens are now quite dependent on India for critical healthcare services and frequent trips to Kochi, Mumbai and Chennai for medical purposes are a testimony to that reality. During the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was India which provided Maldives with 1 lakh doses of vaccines to ramp up its flailing health sector. Even the largest hospital in Maldives, the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, constructed was with Indian funding and technical assistance.⁵⁶

Being so closely attached with another country, naturally, has its baggage; and India has to deal with that in Maldives, like many other South Asian states. The coalition that assumed power from

⁵⁵Didi, R. M. (2022, November 21). *The Maldives' Tug of War Over India and National Security*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/21/maldives-tug-of-war-over-india-and-national-security-pub-88418>

⁵⁶Ibid.

the Solih-led MDP government has responded differently to India's engagement in Maldives; ranging from estrangement to paranoia about losing sovereignty. The present incumbent, when they were in the opposition, protested against the previous MDP government's dealings with India citing lack of transparency. They demanded discussion in *Majlis* about various Memoranda of Understanding signed between New Delhi and Male during the MDP rule. For them, the 'India First' approach adopted by the Solih administration was essentially a ploy imposed by New Delhi to pour in more Indians into the islands in different outfits; and they cited the case of the National College of Policing and Law Enforcement or the UTF Project as examples of Indian infiltration in Maldivian soil in disguise. Interestingly, the same opposition which had organised so many rallies and public meetings in protest of India's alleged intervention did not deter from lobbying with Indian officials either. A delegation of senior leaders from the opposition met with Indian Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, while he was on a visit to Male, and shared their side of the story. The opposition leaders probably realised that their continuous and sharp reactions to Indian engagement might jeopardise common Maldivian's access to India, which they could hardly afford. This seemed to be a balancing act, as it was not possible for them to distance themselves from the 'India Out' campaign either, which was expected to give political dividends.⁵⁷

In South Asian politics, very often the road to power differs widely from the road taken while being in power. Foreign policy, to be precise India policy, of Maldives should be looked into from that perspective only. Despite whatever rhetoric used while campaigning, so far, all governments in Maldives have maintained cordial relations with New Delhi. Yes, of late, growing influence of China is a concern for India, but that should not be looked at from a standalone point of view; instead a complete view must be adopted. For instance, the Solih administration continued

⁵⁷Ibid.

fostering cordial ties with Beijing, despite prior criticisms of China's increasing financial influence during the MDP's tenure in opposition. China's involvement in key initiatives in the Maldives continued seamlessly and several high-level diplomatic interactions and signing of multiple Memoranda of Understanding had also occurred under the MDP-led government. Similarly, despite the apparent anti-India stance while campaigning for the presidential post in 2012-13, Yameen did not depart from a foreign policy which prioritised India throughout his presidency. Rather, he was keen on mending ties ruptured by his predecessor Waheed Hassan's decisions, such as the GMR fiasco. His maiden state visit was to New Delhi, and he frequently emphasised India as the Maldives' closest diplomatic and developmental partner. He went on to the extent of urging Maldivian press to not report negatively about India and Indian leaders. It was Yameen who signed the Defence Action Plan in 2016, under which the UTF Project had started. Irony is that PPM led by Yameen and their ally PNC had campaigned against the same project in the run-up to the just concluded presidential polls.⁵⁸

When analysing the latest presidential election and its outcomes, more often than not we tend to see it as a tug of war between New Delhi and Beijing; and in the process, the real issues get lost. These include issues such as the housing crisis in an overly centralised and densely populated capital, stalled projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Project, widespread corruption, and an impending debt crisis aggravated by the pandemic. The other vital issue remains the balancing act between economic growth and environmental sustainability, as being an archipelago sitting at sea level, Maldives is deeply concerned about the future of their little habitable land in the face of climate change.

⁵⁸Ghafoor, M. A. (2023, October 12). Maldives' Presidential Election Was Not A Referendum on India or China. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/maldives-presidential-election-was-not-a-referendum-on-india-or-china/>

The foreign media has mostly failed to see in detail the domestic political landscape marred by personality clashes. It is evident now that had Nasheed not gone away with his loyalists from the MDP, Solih would have had a second term. Solih was first thought to be a strong loyalist of Nasheed; but after his ascendancy to presidency and in the party, he differed from Nasheed on many occasions, most importantly on turning the presidential system of government into a parliamentary one, where Nasheed expected to come back to the centre stage. The Democrats, the party formed by Nasheed, could not do much but block Solih's way to the chair for a second time. Same kind of internal rift is present in the current ruling alliance of PPM-PNC.⁵⁹ Abdulla Yameen remained the central player, even from behind the bars, during the campaign and the election phase. He only reluctantly lent his support to Mohamed Muizzu and the PNC when it became clear that he himself had no chance to contest this time. As he has been acquitted from the charges and released from jail in April 2024, the future of the ruling coalition is, for sure, not going to be as smooth as it seemed in January last; even though the ruling coalition has secured a thumping majority in the Majlis by general election held in April.⁶⁰

India has a lot at stake in Maldives now, and its future engagement depends largely on the signal received from Male. The intensity, persistence and funding of the 'India Out' campaign must be looked into thoroughly. Mobilising people on the back of anti-India sentiments is a common phenomenon to witness in other neighbours also, especially during the election seasons. Being a larger neighbour, India had let it go in the past, and probably it would do the same again. To secure

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ranjan, A. (2024, April 26). *Parliamentary Elections in the Maldives*. Institute of South Asian Studies- NUS. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/parliamentary-elections-in-the-maldives/>

its neighbourhood, a long-term approach is needed and New Delhi is evidently on its way to start afresh with the Muizzu administration in the Maldives.⁶¹

2.6 Conclusion

To start with, this chapter has clearly shown that India no longer enjoys its earlier ‘natural’ influence over its South Asian neighbours, despite its rapid economic progress and growing political clout in the last three decades. Several factors have contributed to this scenario; the most important being the ever-increasing interest of an assertive China in South Asian affairs. For various strategic reasons, starting from opening of its least developed western and south-western provinces to the outer world to counter American influence in the neighbourhood, Beijing is continuously spreading its diplomatic tentacles with the help of financial muscle. In other parts of the world, some other regional powers are facing the heat, like that of Japan and South Korea in the East, or Vietnam and Malaysia in Southeast Asia. India, being the regional power in South Asia, has inadvertently drawn into such competitive geostrategic games. In this backdrop, the smaller neighbours quite often use China as a deterrent to curb Indian influence on their domestic and international pursuits. Said so, we also need to remember that China has not replaced India in South Asia; and, there is no sign of something like that happening either.

India is still the natural choice of these states for almost everything; starting from business to education, or from healthcare to disaster management. India is the largest or the second largest after China, a business partner of all these nations (except Pakistan). Though China has emerged

⁶¹Revi, V. (2023, July 31). *Maintaining momentum in India–Maldives relations*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/maintaining-momentum-in-india-maldives-relations/>

as a significant trade partner of South Asian states in recent decades, each one of them is quite well aware of the Chinese business model and loan diplomacy, especially after witnessing what happened in Sri Lanka and the current situation in Pakistan. The initial euphoria on Chinese investment is no longer there, and some of these states are again rebalancing their economies in the older pattern, favouring India. Also, the way India responded to emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or the super cyclones in Bangladesh, water crisis in Maldives, bankruptcy of Sri Lanka, and even the two devastating floods in Pakistan, all have reaffirmed India's primacy in the region. New Delhi's misreading of ground situations in some cases, and the last remnants of the old value system in the policy circles which self-ascribe a leadership role to India, are the two main reasons for whatever diplomatic losses it had to bear in recent times. India is so deeply connected with all these neighbours with possibly the longest intertwined history compared to other regional powers anywhere in the world, that it is simply impossible to re-imagine South Asia without India being the pivot. Pakistan has consistently denied such an arrangement and courted the Chinese to carve out its own separate path since the early 1990s; come to the present, it is the only state which has practically been side-lined from the common South Asian ventures.

In recent times, signs of accepting new realities and effort in adopting new strategies accordingly are seen in New Delhi. The neighbourhood policy of India has come a long way from Gujral Doctrine of unequal reciprocity to Manmohan Singh's policy of sharing the fruits of economic development with the neighbours to Narendra Modi's more assertive actions backed by development cooperation; while South Asia's regional cooperation mechanism SAARC became dormant and several other small or medium scale platforms have emerged. The new bottom-up approach which is marked by sector based or project based cooperation with specific timelines in mutually beneficial areas in place of grand political moves with a top-down approach has

witnessed some real progress on the ground. Sub-regional platforms like the BBIN, for instance, have been instrumental in cosyng up with Bangladesh without inciting much furore among the anti-India constituencies there. Leveraging their position on the Bay of Bengal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India are in the process of scaling up trilateral business where the BIMSTEC has the potential for providing the necessary platform. Such restructuring of policies and repositioning of energy and resources is the only way forward in the backdrop of a changing South Asia. This is true not for these four neighbours only, but for Nepal and Bhutan as well, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

India's Bilateral Ties with South Asian Neighbours (2):

Nepal and Bhutan

3.1 Introduction

Nepal and Bhutan have always remained politically close to India; be it in friendly terms or in resentment. Since independence, India engaged the two northern neighbours primarily following the footprints of the British, who never exercised direct control over them, but at the same time, never let them go against its interests in the region. Of course, independent India's stance was way more moderate and it replaced the element of coercion with that of developmental cooperation to rally these Himalayan Kingdoms in world affairs in line with its own path. Most of the time they followed suit, but sometimes they disregarded Indian action too. Nepal, with its dramatic changes in the domestic political arena from time to time, has been more difficult to engage with; while, Indian interests have largely converged with Bhutan's nearly always. The emergence of a powerful China since the 1950s and its hegemonic intentions initially played an instrumental role in bringing Nepal close to India; but as time went by, Kathmandu chose a more balanced approach, sometimes even playing New Delhi and Beijing against each other. In the case of Bhutan, both under the monarchical and democratic administrations, India has been considered as a time-tested ally; but the democratic governments, since 2008, are more open to experimentation and exploring choices than the previous monarchical regimes. In general, these two important Himalayan states, both strategically and in terms of people-to-people connect, have remained significant hinges in India's regional ambition and global pursuits. With regard to India's neighbourhood policy both have

remained crucial, particularly by playing their part in regional forum SAARC, and later sub-regional mechanisms like the BIMSTEC and BBIN.

3.2 India-Nepal Relations

India and Nepal have historically maintained an enduring social connection, forming the foundation of their bilateral relations in modern times. The two countries share about 1850 KM of open borders and five Indian states, namely Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand lay along the boundary. Nepal's relationship with India includes multiple facets, such as social, cultural, political, and economic ones. Bilateral relations have been characterised by both visible and invisible dynamics. The visible current, encompassing political and economic dimensions, often exhibits volatility. However, the invisible current, driven by historical, geographical, cultural, social, and familial ties have consistently moved forward.

The British East India Company's engagement with Nepal began after its rise to power in Bengal. The King of Nepal and the British East India Company signed the Treaty of Sugauli in March 1816, which resulted in the loss of one-third of the Kingdom of Nepal's land. This treaty was the result of the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-16). However, the treaty guaranteed employment for Nepalese citizens in the Company's military service, and this has persisted to this day under the name of Gorkha Regiment in the Indian Army. Four decades later, to convey gratitude to Nepal for its assistance in quelling the 1857 Mutiny, the Company did nevertheless return some of its land back to her.

Inheriting the arrangements made by the British Raj, the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed on July 31, 1950, soon after Indian independence. By this treaty, India

acknowledged Nepal's landlocked status and its corresponding entitlement to import and export goods through Indian territory and ports. In addition, in a show of goodwill, Delhi relinquished its right to levy customs duty for transit.¹ Having said this and despite the fact that India is larger than Nepal in nearly all aspects—population, territory, economy, military, etc.—one should not conceive Nepal as a vassal of India; rather India's key security interests depend on and are linked to a major extent with Nepal. Since the advent of modern Nepal in the late 18th century, India's security concerns in the northern frontier are deeply intertwined with it.²

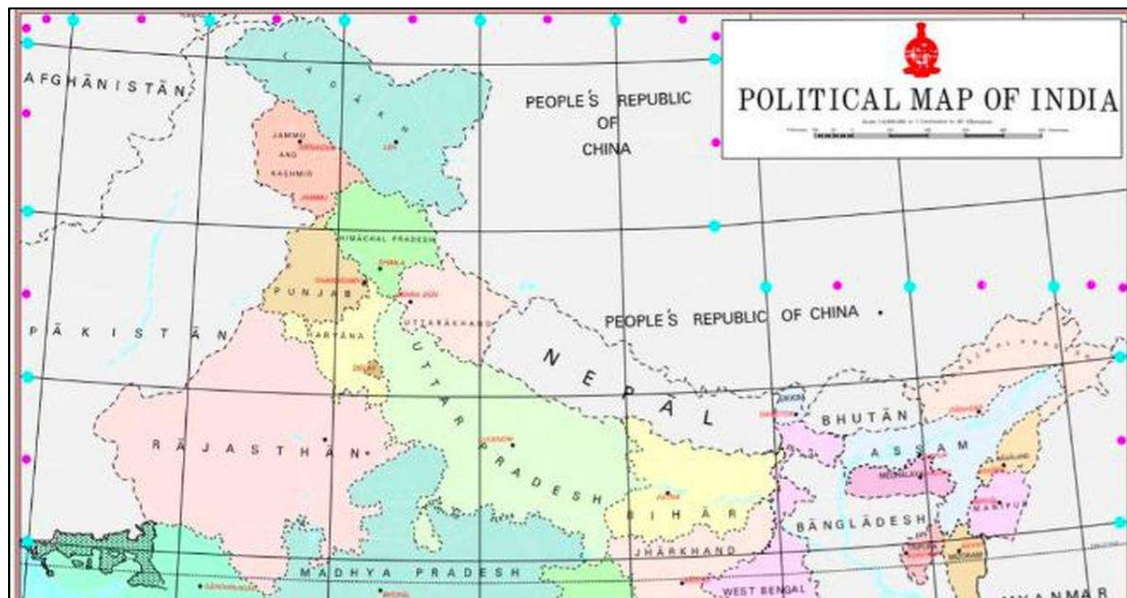


Figure 9: Strategic location of Nepal between India and China.
Source: Government of India

The geo-strategic significance of Nepal, as emphasised by independent India, can be seen as a continuation of the views held by British India, which had established treaty agreements with Nepal on this matter. The hereditary Rana autocracy in Nepal pursued a policy of isolation, as their

¹Vishnu, P. M. (2015). *Changing Trends in India Nepal Relations* [PhD Dissertation, Sri Venkateswara University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/185274>

²Murthy, P. (1999). India and Nepal: Security and Economic Dimensions. *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII (9). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99mup01.html#txt1

regime relied quite heavily on the British support for its continuity. In fact, threat perceptions towards India are not directly connected to Nepal itself, rather these concerns stem from three derived or implied factors. First, the absence of a natural barrier along the Indo-Nepal borders allows any power, particularly China, to easily access the Indian mainland through Nepal. Second, a politically and economically unstable Nepal would be more susceptible to such a scenario, thereby exposing the Indian plains. And finally, there is apprehension that, with uncertainties of regional politics factored in, Nepal may adopt policies, both internally and externally, which could undermine India's security interests around the region.³

For a century and half, a weak China in the north and a strong British India in the south had forced Nepal to adopt a policy of accommodation and compliance first towards the British and then, shortly, towards independent India. From the 1950s, the situation started changing though, with the emergence of an assertive socialist China in the north. During the Cold War, Nepal was practically sandwiched between the two large neighbours; an independent, democratic India and a communist China. Naturally Kathmandu had to find a balance between the two and reorient its policy according to the developing situations. China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 was seen as a serious threat in Nepal where the ruling Rana regime was already under pressure from the pro-democracy movement under the banner of Nepali Congress. After overthrowing of the Rana regime in 1951 and reinstatement of real powers in the monarchy, the then King Tribhuban, having warm personal connections with the Indian leadership of that time, steered Nepal towards India. On the other hand, India sought for and eventually achieved, though very short-lived, a fragile alliance of all three parties involved—the King, the supporters of the Ranas and the democrats.⁴

³Ibid.

⁴Singh, R. (2009). *Global dimensions of Indo-Nepal Political Relations: Post Independence* (1st ed.). Gyan Publishing House.

The coronation of King Mahendra in 1955 and India's loss in the 1962 Indo-China border war disrupted the prevailing arrangement, which heavily relied on the influence of two individuals, Nehru and King Tribhuban. Nepal tried to capitalise on the post-war developments to seek more concessions from India and showed signs to erode its obligations under the 1950 Treaty. King Mahendra's dismissal of the democratic government was met with strong criticism from India, and India's reaction was resented by Nepal which also perceived, at that point of time, an imminent threat from India. The security of the regime was considered synonymous with the security of the state, and as a result Kathmandu and New Delhi came to be on different plains. The situation got only worse as Nepal went on to strengthen its ties with China as well as Pakistan. During King Mahendra's time, India's military mission in Nepal underwent a gradual reduction in both its size and mandate, before ultimately being completely withdrawn, and India's leverage in manning Nepal's northern borders with China alongside the Nepalese Army was gone. Indian dominance was re-established only with India's decisive victory in the war of 1971 against Pakistan, subsequent nuclear testing in 1974, and the annexation of the Kingdom of Sikkim in 1975. Kathmandu expressed serious concern and strongly objected to the Indian act in Sikkim. Fearing an aggressive Indian action in Nepal also, the then King Birendra proposed the establishment of his land as a 'zone of peace'. Seeking support for his proposal, he even undertook a global campaign. From the very beginning India rejected the proposal though.⁵

With the coming of the Janata Dal government in New Delhi in 1977, the relations between the two neighbours thawed a little. India accepted Nepal's long-time demand for separating the trade and transit agreements, and separate treaties with regard to each one was signed in 1978. Again,

⁵Harris, G. L., & Savada, A. M. (Eds.). (1993). *Nepal and Bhutan: Country Studies* (3rd ed.) [Library of Congress Website]. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/cntrystd.bt>

this warmth was short-lived and soon Nepal's royal family started blaming New Delhi of colluding with the pro-democracy movement which aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy. By the middle of the 1980s, with downsizing of the Soviet Union becoming apparent, pro-democracy and anti-regime movements spread across Eastern Europe and that triggered the same reaction in other parts of the world as well; and Nepal was no exception in this. To repel the mass movement, Kathmandu secretly tried to buy weapons from China in 1988 and this action was strongly objected to by India. New Delhi cited violation of the 1950 Treaty, and on the other hand, Kathmandu demanded the treaty itself be reviewed. As a result, with the expiration of the 1978 Trade and Transit Treaties, India again clubbed the two together and put economics and security in the same basket like before. Though Nepal was not ready to go back to the pre-1978 arrangements, India was firm on showing its indispensability in Nepal. As a result, an economic blockade for more than a year ensued, and the Nepali economy crumbled; which further accelerated the pro-democracy movement.

In April, 1990, the erstwhile Panchayat System was abolished and replaced by a multi-party democracy through a Royal Declaration. Thus, a new era in Indo-Nepal relations had begun, and both sides started showing sensitivity to each other's security and economic concerns. The newly elected Nepalese Prime Minister K.P. Bhattarai's visit to New Delhi and meeting with his Indian counterpart V.P. Singh in 1990 brought back some of the old warmth in bilateral relationships. Consequently, India withdrew its trade embargo on Nepal and the latter witnessed a gradual return of normalcy in public life. The eighth Five Year Plan (1992-1997) of Nepal, which coincided with India's economic liberalisation process, brought about comprehensive reforms in the Nepali

economy as well. The journey to market economies around the same time further boosted the bilateral ties as India emerged as one of the largest foreign investors in Nepal.⁶

Nepal's politics remained full of surprises, and sudden turns and twists, during the late 1990s and first half of the 2000s. The massacre of the Royal Family, followed by intense civil war between the Nepalese state and the Maoist guerrillas in the hinterland, then peace between democratic and revolutionary forces and restoration of parliamentary democracy, at least on paper, by 2006—it was a decade of frenetic politicking. Naturally, those rapid changes internally made Nepal act accordingly in the outside world, and relations with India also underwent flip-flops. Apparently, India was instrumental in bringing all the warring parties to the discussion table for finding a solution to the decade-long bloody fighting. Nepal's politics is anything but stable, even today. Frequent change in prime minister's office, constitutional deadlocks, assertion of the president from time to time and inability to reach consensus on several basic issues like citizenship make Nepal a very difficult state to maintain consistent friendly relations with.

3.2.1 Developmental Cooperation between India and Nepal

India is Nepal's largest trade partner and the main source of foreign investments. In addition to that, India serves as the transit route for almost cent percent of Nepal's third country trade. It also accounts for approximately two-thirds of merchandise trade, one-third of trade in services, one-third of foreign direct investments, nearly 100% of petroleum supplies, and a substantial portion of inward remittances from pensioners, professionals, and workers employed in India.⁷ The total

⁶Vishnu, P. M. (2015). *Changing Trends in India Nepal Relations* [PhD Dissertation, Sri Venkateswara University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/185274>

⁷*Commerce Wing Brief*. (2022, June 21). Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/page/about-trade-and-commerce/>

amount of trade between the two neighbours in the year 2022 was about USD 6.5 billion, of which India exported USD 5.93 billion and Nepal's export clocked at USD 508 million, marking a huge trade deficit on Nepal's account.⁸ Moreover, Indian firms are among the largest investors in Nepal, accounting for about 32% of the total approved foreign direct investments (FDI), amounting to USD 520 million. There are about 150 Indian ventures at present operating in Nepal and they are mainly engaged in manufacturing, services (banking, insurance, dry port, education, and telecom), power sector and tourism industries.⁹

To reduce the unhealthy trade deficit, cooperation in the hydropower sector has been encouraged during the last one decade or so. In recent years, India has taken the lead in accelerating this win-win partnership, somewhat following the successful model that it has worked out with Bhutan. Irrespective of the fact that Nepal itself is deficient in electricity production vis-à-vis its domestic needs, from 2021, India began purchasing electricity from Nepal's hydropower plants.; keeping the objective of maximising Nepal's revenue share in trade with India. Building on this momentum, the two nations have also agreed to upscale the latter's hydropower export quota to 10,000 MW over the next 10 years. Nepal signed new Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Indian firms to develop Arun and Karnali Hydropower Projects, and agreed to explore the feasibility of the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project. India, on the other hand, committed to facilitate Nepal's hydropower exports to Bangladesh. Thus, Kathmandu expects to reduce the trade deficit with New Delhi to a major extent by exporting electricity produced by hydropower plants funded and constructed by India only.

⁸*India (IND) and Nepal (NPL) trade.* (n.d.). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/npl>

⁹*India-Nepal Bilateral Relations.* (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; MEA, Govt. of India. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf

Nepal's economy is in bad shape for quite some time now, due to political instability as well as natural mishaps. By an estimation of the World Bank, Nepal lost about USD 11 billion in GDP during the 2008-2016 period only due to frequent power cuts which impacted its industrial sector which was rebuilding itself after the long civil war. Currently, Nepal is facing food and fuel inflation, shortage of essential commodities, and depleting foreign reserves. Kathmandu is on the verge of a recession as a result of increasing trade deficit, inflation, unemployment and declining foreign direct investments. With limited options at hand, it is also seeking assistance from an Extended Credit Facility offered by the International Monetary Fund. Naturally, its primary focus is now on containing inflation while at the same time raising capital for a push in industrial production which will eventually reduce unemployment and trade deficit; and for realising all these, more integration with the Indian economy and assistance from New Delhi is essential.¹⁰

Under the doctrine of Neighbourhood First, India is putting more and more energy and money in infrastructure building in the neighbouring countries. Currently, it is assisting, both monetarily and technically, Nepal to develop border infrastructure through upgrading of 10 roads in the Terai region, and development of cross-border rail links at Jogbani-Biratnagar and Jayanagar-Bardibas. It is also helping in establishment of Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) to facilitate cross-border trade at Birgunj, Biratnagar, Bhairahawa, and Nepalgunj. Two ICPs, Raxaul-Birgunj and Jogbani-Biratnagar, have already been commissioned; and the other two, Sunauli-Bhairahawa and Nepalgunj Road-Nepalgunj are under construction. Government-controlled Indian Oil Corporation Ltd. had laid South Asia's maiden cross-border oil pipeline connecting Bihar's Motihari depot to

¹⁰Pant, H. V., & Shivamurthy, A. G. (2023, June 7). *India-Nepal Relations Soar High*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-nepal-relations-soar-high/>

Amlekhgunj in Nepal to meet Nepal's fuel needs smoothly.¹¹ Through the Union Budget of 2023, the Government of India announced INR 550 crore as grants assistance to Nepal, a hike of 29.4% over the previous year, and second highest after Bhutan.¹²

The Government of India was the first to respond to the massive earthquake of April 2015 in Nepal. As soon as the devastation of the tremors surfaced, New Delhi promptly sent National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams with special aircrafts to start rescue and relief operations. Indian assistance reached Nepal within six hours which included 16 NDRF teams, 39 Indian Air Force sorties with approximately 600 tonnes of relief materials such as medical supplies, food, water, tents, blankets and tarpaulin sheets. Indian doctors and paramedics were deployed in various parts of Nepal. Indian engineers were instrumental in restoring three power sub-stations in Kathmandu valley which brought back electricity and helped rescue operations. The total Indian relief assistance to Nepal, in immediate response, reached USD 67 million.¹³ Later on, in the International Conference held in Kathmandu in June 2015, which called for Nepal's reconstruction, New Delhi committed a fund of USD 250 million as grant and USD 750 million as soft loan. List of projects have been identified for the utilisation of grant and those are nearing completion (like rebuilding the collapsed houses, which is done for over 90% cases); while all projects are yet to be finalised for the use of the Line of Credit.¹⁴

¹¹*About Development Partnership*. (n.d.). Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/page/about-development-partnership/>

¹²India raises Nepal grant by 29 percent to Rs8.8 billion. (2023, February 1). *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2023/02/01/india-raises-nepal-grant-by-29-percent-to-rs8-8-billion>

¹³*India-Nepal Bilateral Relations*. (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; MEA, Govt. of India. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf

¹⁴*Nepal-India Relations*. (n.d.). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal. Retrieved August 28, 2023, from <https://mofa.gov.np/nepal-india-relations/>

India's contribution to the development of human resources in Nepal has been extensive and it covers a broad range from education to skill enhancement and so on. The Government of India offers more than 3000 scholarships annually to Nepalese youth for various courses at the PhD/ Masters, Bachelors and plus-two levels both in India and Nepal. The number of Nepali students studying in India on a self-financing basis is much higher than this number though. New Delhi hosts Nepalese journalists/ editors in familiarisation visits to India; and also organises short-term training programmes for Nepalese editors/ journalists/ experts/ officials in the field of print and electronic media. Indian assistance also goes to several India-Nepal Friendship Organisations working to promote Indian culture and India-Nepal ties. India is establishing an e-library system across Nepal to expand digital education to the remotest of areas.¹⁵

A large number of MoUs have been signed over decades between Indian social and cultural institutions, under and outside the government auspices, and their Nepali counterparts. During his visit to Nepal on the occasion of the 18th SAARC Summit in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a 200-bed trauma centre built by India, gifted a helicopter to the Nepal Army, and handed over a mobile soil-testing laboratory as a goodwill gesture.¹⁶ Gifting such as this is a part of Indian assistance since long; in fact, almost every year, on Republic Days or Independence Days, New Delhi hands out Nepal things of immediate and material importance. In recent times, in April last, for example, India provided Nepal with 35 ambulances and 66 school buses.¹⁷

¹⁵India-Nepal Bilateral Relations. (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; MEA, Govt. of India. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf

¹⁶Jaisawal, P. (2017, August 16). *India-Nepal Relations: Mixed Fortunes*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5338

¹⁷Indian govt gifts 35 ambulances and 66 school buses in Nepal districts. (2024, April 14). DD News. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/indian-govt-gifts-35-ambulances-and-66-school-buses-in-nepal-districts/>

3.2.2 The Uniqueness of the Ties

Completing 75 years of diplomatic relations, the Indo-Nepal ties now stand on solid footing. Obviously, there are differences in opinions and perceptions between the two neighbours, but the engagement nevertheless continues to grow. One interesting character of this bilateral relationship is a few contradictions that it entails, which are not common to India's ties with other neighbours. To start with, India has been a permanent feature in almost all major political changes in Nepal; sometimes it was involved directly, while at other times it remained behind the curtains. It played a direct role in the overthrowing of the Rana regime in 1951, promoted and supported the pro-democracy movement in 1990 that laid down the path of a multi-party democracy, and also somewhat set the directions of the Jana Andolan-II of 2006 which ultimately abolished the monarchy in Nepal. Some Nepalis even suspect an Indian hand behind every change in government in Kathmandu. At the same time, these were the very changes that came upon popular demand in Nepal; and, in fact, people fought for these changes.

Second, India is critical to Nepal's security in two ways. On the one hand, it is Nepal's primary conventional security threat, and on the other, it is the guarantor of the same. The enormous asymmetry in size, power, and capability between India and Nepal is a concern for the latter. Having an unresolved border with India, the threat perception was further heightened by India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975. Under obligations of the Treaty of 1950, Nepal is totally dependent on India with regard to procurement of arms; and only once when it tried to deviate from this obligation by importing arms from China in 1988, it had to face devastating economic consequences. India put up an economic blockade, and not only Nepal's economy but general life also choked. Contrarily, India is also the country that Nepal looks up to in case of an emergency.

For example, India was the first country to bring in relief and start rescue operations after the earthquake in 2015 and also the first to supply Covid-19 vaccines during the pandemic.

Third, India also looms large in Nepal's economy. During the 1950s and the 1960s, India was practically Nepal's sole trading partner; though the volume was very low, India accounted for a massive 95% of overall trade. During those days of government-controlled economy on both sides, Nepal had been able to manage a thin but positive balance in bilateral trade. With the liberalisation process coming in from the early 1990s, the situation changed rapidly in India's favour with a surge in trade volume. Since then Nepal's imports from India had surpassed exports to it by incredible margins. At present, as we have noted previously, the trade deficit stands negatively for Nepal to the tune of USD 6 billion in 2022. Economically, from interdependence, Nepal has now become dependent on India.

Finally, India has a major influence in Nepal's socio-cultural realm as well. Starting from ties of civilisation and mythology, the linkages run deep into religious and cultural bonds which are popularly referred to as '*roti-beti*' ties. Bollywood and cricket are very popular in Nepal and a staple diet for general entertainment. It is a difficult task to separate Indians from the nationals of Nepal at the border areas. Younger Nepalis strive for an identity independent of Indians, but fact remains that there are a large number of Indian Nepalis in the Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal as well as in parts of north-east Indian provinces and Uttarakhand often causes some confusion. As such, any suggestion that Nepalis of Nepal and Indians are the same is strongly opposed; and, to some extent, 'othering' India is a key to typical identity assertion.¹⁸

¹⁸Poudel, S. S. (2022, June 23). India-Nepal Diplomatic Relations at 75: Full of Contradictions. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/india-nepal-diplomatic-relations-at-75-full-of-contradictions/>

Nepal has often shown keen interest in reducing dependence on India; and at some points, its overtures in that direction have led the two quite close to confrontation. New Delhi has remained highly sensitive to any such effort as the only alternative Nepal has, to maintain international engagement bypassing India, is China. Though Nepal has deeper connections with China now than ever before, it has not resulted in lessening its dependence on India even a bit. On the back of modern technology and a strong economy, China has made trans-Himalayan movements much easier during the last three decades. As a result, Nepal has increased connectivity in trade, transport, investment, cultural exchange and party-to-party relations (Communist parties of the two countries to be specific) with China.

Still, for China, Tibet is more important and sensitive than Nepal, and to protect Tibet from external influence or internal split, Beijing has militarised the whole Himalayas. Modern highways and sophisticated border crossing points have not been able to alter the reality that the border itself has become more impenetrable than it was until early 1990s. Several administrative hurdles have been put up on the China-Nepal border by the Chinese in the name of security; and these appear to be stringent only for the Nepalis. It is an easy task for Chinese cargo shipments to enter Nepal, while Nepalese trucks stand in queue for indefinite time at border crossings. Therefore, Kathmandu's agreement with Beijing to use the latter's ports for international trade and commerce has remained highly symbolic. For a select group of political and business elite, personal channels of access to China have been built in recent years, but for the common people, it is India which is enmeshed in their daily life. For instance, Nepal's southern border with India is warm and lively,

while, even after modernisation of crossings, the northern border with China remains as cold and high as the Himalayas.¹⁹ As Tsering Shakya puts it,

“Despite China’s aid and its cornering of the market in luxury and other goods, the Nepal-China relationship remains almost entirely confined to the government and the elite. There is hardly any people-to-people contact between Nepalese and Chinese.”²⁰

3.2.3 Irritants in Bilateral Ties

The relationship between India and Nepal has its share of problems. Nepal persistently calls upon India to revise the 1950 Treaty; also, India has been repeatedly urged to open new air routes, reverse anti-dumping measures, and fix boundary issues. In the recent past, India decided to restrict its markets to Nepali infrastructure projects, hydroelectric plants, and airports that get Chinese assistance and this has contributed further to Nepal's anxiety. Both countries need to deal with these issues, but resolving them requires transparency and a holistic approach.²¹

Since its signing, the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship has been a sore point between the two neighbours. Generations of Nepali leaders have seen this Treaty as heavily tilted in India’s favour. The first generation of democrats in Nepal used to share very close personal relations with the then Indian leaders, and the two sides were partners in India’s struggle for independence during the 1940s. This interpersonal bond faded away with passing of time and Nepali leaders of later

¹⁹Gurung, S. (2023, September 21). Fortified Himalayas: Why Nepal Can’t Shake its Dependence on India. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/fortified-himalayas-why-nepal-cant-shake-its-dependence-on-india/>

²⁰Shakya, T. (2015, April 29). In conversation on ‘Is China Building Up Soft Power by Aiding Nepal?’ ChinaFile. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/china-building-soft-power-aiding-nepal>

²¹Pant, H. V., & Shivamurthy, A. G. (2023, June 7). *India-Nepal Relations Soar High*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-nepal-relations-soar-high/>

generations did not like to see that bond with India as 'organic'. Currently, half of Nepal's population is below the age of 25, and Nepali youth are spread across the globe for studies and work; naturally, they refuse to see India through a lens that their forefathers used to see. Moreover, allurements from the Chinese side also stokes anti-India sentiments among the youth staying back in Nepal; the way Nepali youth took to the streets to protest India's road development in the Kalapani area in 2020, during the time of pandemic, is one of such signs. India has amended and made the bilateral treaty with Bhutan relevant with present times in 2007; this gave Nepal's demand to amend its own with India more traction since then.

Fixing the border issues is another long pending chapter in India-Nepal relations. India and Nepal are not the only South Asian countries experiencing continuing disagreements on the border with each other. The beginning of colonial rule in the region has led to changes in the idea of 'sovereignty' and 'territory', resulting in border disputes. In fact, the process of border delineation, following European standards, transformed the region from one organically connected through history to one with fixed frontiers. In this particular case the disputes can be traced back to the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, by which the British East India Company demarcated areas under its control from that of the Kingdom of Nepal. Since then, successive Nepali rulers and governments protested this delineation of border in the western sector, calling it an imposition of the British which independent India has carried forward. The main point of difference revolves around the strategically significant Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh tri-junction area where India, Nepal and China converge. Modern Nepal has often accused India of 'cartographic assertion'; while India maintains that it has a military presence in the tri-junction since 1954, and the area has been brought several times in Indo-China border talks, putting Nepal out of the equation. Despite having disagreements with regard to borders in other sectors too, especially keeping the open nature of

such borders in mind, the strategic importance of the tri-junction has made it the most contested area till now.²²

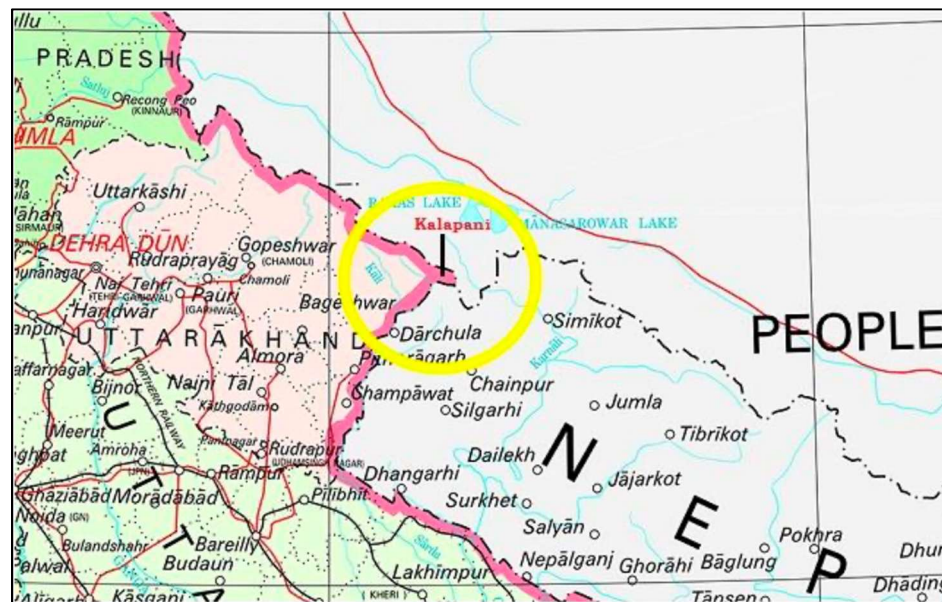


Figure 10: The India-Nepal-China tri-junction in the Kalapani region.
Source: The Kathmandu Post, dated 19.11.2019

The problem has become more complicated in recent years with the politicisation of foreign relations and rise of ultra-nationalism on both sides of the border. The most recent series of controversies ensued when the Indian government published a new political map in November 2019. The new map was required following the revocation of Article 370 in the Indian Constitution which stripped the special status that was originally accorded to the state of Jammu and Kashmir; and established the Union Territory of Ladakh. Nepal raised a protest to the newly introduced map, asserting that the drawing of its western boundary with India in the Kalapani region was deliberately stretched into Nepal. This incident sparked widespread public outrage in Nepal,

²²Pulami, M. J., & Aryal, S. K. (2023, April). *Finding an End to Border Disputes: the India-Nepal Imperative*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 28, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/finding-an-end-to-border-disputes/>

leading to mass protests against India. The ruling CPN-UML alliance government whose influence was on the wane at that time, did not waste a moment to capitalise on this controversy to strengthen its hold on power. The Nepal government went on to publish a new map on their own which included a large chunk of Indian territory within its border and the map was endorsed unanimously by the Nepali Parliament. In May 2020, Indian Defence Minister Mr. Rajnath Singh tweeted his satisfaction on the completion of a road to Lipulekh Pass which was supposed to ease the travel to Kailash Manas Sarovar for Indian pilgrims; and this again caused a country-wide agitation in Nepal as they believed that the road was passing through Nepalese territory. In yet another incident, the display of a map of the so-called 'Akhand Bharat' in the new Parliament building in New Delhi sparked controversy; and in protest, the mayor of Kathmandu put up a map of 'Greater Nepal' in his office. These developments, which are typically rhetorical, and primarily aimed at the two countries' respective electorates, presented a serious challenge to the diplomatic community for any future resolutions on the border.²³

Another issue which is clouding India-Nepal relations now is the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers in the Indian Army. Independent India followed the tradition of British India which recruited Gorkha soldiers from the hill districts of Nepal since the Sugauli Treaty. This unique practice continued until 2022, when India launched its 'Agnipath' scheme for recruitment in its armed forces. Under the scheme, any soldier not belonging to the rank of commissioned officer will be recruited on a fixed 4-year contract, which will be renewed only for a part of the recruits on completion of the tenure satisfactorily. This scheme covers the recruitment of the Gorkha community as well. As long-term service guaranteed Nepali Gorkha military personnel benefits

²³Gupta, R. (2023, July 31). *Fault lines persist in India–Nepal relations*. East Asia Forum. Retrieved September 28, 2023, from <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/07/31/fault-lines-persist-in-india-nepal-relations/>

on par with their Indian colleagues, the new recruits will be bereft of any such benefits. They will not be granted military pension or other social security benefits. As a result, Nepal is now reluctant to send young Gorkhas to the Indian Army as it assumes a short four-year service and no guarantee of jobs afterwards will only cause social tensions as the returnees will find it difficult to re-enter civilian life in Nepal. The long-lasting tradition of keeping the 32,000-men strong Gorkha Regiment, thus, is now under serious questions.²⁴

Another irritant in Indo-Nepal relations in the recent past has been the 2015 economic blockade put up by the Madhesi population of Nepal who live along the Indian borders. Just a little over a year after Prime Minister Modi's visit to Nepal in 2014, and the major support provided by India after the April 2015 earthquake, came the 135-days blockade, following the promulgation of Nepal's constitution in September 2015. India was perceived to have supported the blockade that stopped oil and other essentials from reaching Nepal; causing a massive disruption in public life, and damaging further an already ailing economy in the post-earthquake period. This incident made Indo-Nepal relationship nosedive to a historic low, and pro-India constituencies in Nepal are yet to be fully convinced about Indian intentions. Following this, New Delhi has diligently focused on perception management and has shied away from commenting on Nepal's internal developments. The Modi administration's flagship Neighbourhood First policy, launched around this time, committed to prioritise the neighbours', including Nepal's, interests and aspirations through economic integration and connectivity. As part of addressing the broader issues, including the revision of the Friendship Treaty, an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) was formed in 2016 and jointly announced at a prime ministerial meeting. The EPG Report was apparently ready in 2018, but it is yet to be formally submitted. Nepal accuses India for the delay and alleges that since some

²⁴Ibid.

of the recommendations of the group did not go along with the wishes of India, as a result, it has decided to sit on it forever.²⁵

3.2.4 Current Trends

Geopolitically, China has not been able to meet the expectations of Nepal, despite its apparent commitment for infrastructure and assistance. The progress in China-Nepal border infrastructure is still inadequate, and there has been a disproportionate increase in trade deficit with China. Beijing has continuously disregarded Nepal's appeal for grants to support the implementation of BRI projects; and till recently, none of the nine projects have been implemented. In order to meet its political objectives, China has also started meddling in Nepal's internal politics. The name of the Chinese ambassador to Kathmandu has surfaced many times in a range of controversies. The publication of the recent 'Standard Map of China' has shown the much-debated tri-junction area inside Indian boundaries, dampening the protesting spirit of Kathmandu further. As a result, China's limitations as a viable alternative to India have led Nepal to reconsider its ties with India, and to look at the bilateral relations from a fresh viewpoint.

New Delhi has also shown a positive attitude on its part; and presently both countries are prioritising sectors where cooperation is easily attainable, putting controversial issues aside.²⁶ The latest visit of Nepal's Prime Minister (Pushpa Kamal Dahal was in chair at that time), during May-

²⁵Press Trust of India. (2024, April 4). Nepal, India should receive EPG report as soon as possible, says Maoist leader Bhusal. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/nepal-india-epg-report-maoist-leader-bhusal-9249795/>

²⁶Pant, H. V., & Shivamurthy, A. G. (2023, June 7). *India-Nepal Relations Soar High*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-nepal-relations-soar-high/>

June 2023 to India only strengthened the fresh efforts. Also, Nepal's eagerness in working on sub-regional platforms with India is a sign of this change in attitude in Kathmandu in recent times.

3.3 India-Bhutan Relations

India's relationship with Bhutan is probably the most special compared to other neighbours, marked by enduring trust, goodwill and mutual understanding. This special character has been maintained through a longstanding practice of frequent high-level visits and dialogues. Formal diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan were established in 1968, marked by the establishment of a dedicated Indian office in Thimphu. The foundation of bilateral relations is the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, initially signed in 1949 and later revised in February 2007. India has provided economic assistance to Bhutan for its socio-economic development from the 1960s, beginning with the launch of Bhutan's planned economy under the first Five Year Plan. Since then India remains Bhutan's primary development partner. India's contribution of INR 4500 cr. for the 12th Five Year Plan (2018-2023) accounts for 73% of Bhutan's total external grants component. The Indian assistance primarily focuses on sectors such as agriculture and irrigation, information and communication technology (ICT), health, industrial development, road transport, energy, civil aviation, urban development, human resource development and capacity building, scholarships, education, and culture. Hydropower cooperation with Bhutan is a central aspect of the bilateral economic cooperation, benefiting both parties; and this collaboration with India remains a crucial driver of socio-economic progress in Bhutan.

The two neighbours engage in active cultural exchanges as well. A large number of Bhutanese pilgrims visit the sacred Buddhist sites in India every year. Due to the unique nature of their relationship, the two maintain an open border that facilitates regular to and fro traffic of people for

various purposes such as employment, tourism, shopping, and medical care. Bhutan shares a 699 KM long border with India, which spans across four Indian states. Moreover, Bhutan plays a significant role in two most important instruments of India's contemporary foreign policy, to be precise neighbourhood policy, tools: the Neighbourhood First Policy and the Act East Policy.²⁷

3.3.1 The Unique Friendship

‘The Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship’ of 1949, consisting of only ten articles, establishes the fundamental framework for bilateral relations between India and Bhutan. The First Article aims to establish enduring peace and friendship between the governments of India and Bhutan by declaring,

"There shall be perpetual peace and friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Bhutan."²⁸

The treaty's Article 2 is considered to be the most significant which includes the contentious provision on security, and it states

“The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations.”²⁹

The second part of this Article, which attempts to qualify Bhutan's external relations, has been subject to criticism and controversy. However, analysing the 1949 Treaty between India and Bhutan in isolation to the historical context of Bhutan's relations and treaties with British India

²⁷*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Ministry of External Affairs. Retrieved September 14, 2023, from

https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_Bilateral_Brief_bhutan_Feb_2020.pdf

²⁸*Treaty or perpetual peace and friendship*. (n.d.). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5242/treaty+or+perpetual+p>

²⁹*Ibid*.

would result in a wrong understanding. The relevant provisions of two treaties between British India and the Kingdom of Bhutan, namely the ‘Treaty of Sinchula’ of 1865 and the ‘Treaty of Punakha’ of 1910 should be considered in this context.³⁰

To start with, the interpretation of Article 2 of the 1949 Treaty should consider the context of Article 8 of the Treaty of 1865. Article 8 pertains to the British government's role in arbitrating disputes between the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Rajas of Sikkim and Cooch Behar. It states that Bhutan would accept and adhere to the decisions made by the British government in such matters. The Treaty of Punakha, signed in 1910, consists of two articles only. One pertains to the hike in the annual payment made by the British Government to the Government of Bhutan, while the other deals with modification of the Article 8 of the 1865 Treaty. The revised article reads,

“The British Government undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Bhutanese Government agrees to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations. In the event of disputes with, or causes of complaint against, the Maharajas of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, such matters will be referred for arbitration to the British Government which will settle them in such manner as justice may require and insist upon the observance of its decisions by the Maharajas named.”

The reading of Article 2 of the 1949 Treaty, therefore, should be done in the context of the corresponding provision of the 1910 Treaty, as it sheds light on the prevailing arrangements between Bhutan and British India.³¹ In such a context, when the controversy regarding Sino-Bhutan boundary arose in the 1950s, Nehru wrote to the Chinese,

“Under the treaty relationship with Bhutan, the government of India are the only competent authority to take matters concerning Bhutan’s external relations, and, in fact,

³⁰Murthy, P. (1999). Indo-Bhutan relations: Serving Mutual Interests. *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII (1).
https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99mup03.html

³¹Ibid.

we have taken up with your government a number of matters on behalf of the Bhutan government.”



*Figure 11: Strategic location of Bhutan between India and China.
Source: India Today, dated 11.07.2017*

However, since 1984, the Indian government has not raised objections to Bhutan and China engaging in direct bilateral negotiations concerning the border dispute on the northern side. Said so, India maintains a high level of sensitivity regarding the north-western part, which includes the strategically valuable tri-junction area. The evolving regional and international landscape, along with Bhutan's aspiration for a sovereign global engagement, has led to a flexible interpretation of the Article 2 of the 1949 Treaty. In fact, India has strongly supported Bhutan in establishing an independent presence in international forums like the UN.³²

³²Ibid.

The 1949 Treaty was amended in 2007 to accommodate contemporary demands and address changes in the international setting. Article 2 of the current treaty states,

“In keeping with the abiding ties of close friendship and cooperation between Bhutan and India, the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Government of the Republic of India shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests. Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.”³³

The primary objective of Article 2 in the Treaty of 1949 was to safeguard India's security interests rather than imposing binding obligations on Bhutan. This intention is also evident in the renegotiated treaty of 2007.

3.3.2 India's Developmental Assistance to Bhutan

Since its independence, India has made substantial contributions to Bhutan's socio-economic development in line with the priorities and requirements of the Bhutanese government and its people. India's development assistance to Bhutan is primarily coordinated through the Bilateral Development Cooperation Talks or Annual Plan Talks. These talks serve as a mechanism for both countries to jointly explore and decide on the components of assistance, and the modalities involved. India has pledged INR 4500 crores in aid to Bhutan for the 12th Five Year Plan (FYP). This assistance package included INR 2800 crores for Project Tied Assistance (PTA), INR 850 crores for High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs), and INR 850 crores for Program Grants/ Development Subsidy. As of March, 2023, India had been in the process of executing 82 PTA projects and 524 HICDPs in Bhutan as part of the 12th FYP. Furthermore, India

³³*Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship*. (n.d.). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved October 4, 2023, from <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5242/treaty+or+perpetual+p>

has allocated INR 400 crores for the Transitional Trade Support Facility and INR 100 crores for the tariff adjustment of the Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Power Project.³⁴ While Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay was on an official visit to New Delhi in March, 2024, Indian PM Narendra Modi pledged INR 10,000 cr. in aid to Bhutan for next five years.³⁵

Apart from the assistance component, the two South Asian neighbours have maintained a long-standing and mutually advantageous transaction in the field of hydroelectric power. The Government of India has built four major hydroelectric projects (HEPs) in Bhutan, with a combined capacity of 2136 MW. These projects include the 336 MW Chukha HEP, 60 MW Kurichhu HEP, 1020 MW Tala HEP, and the recently commissioned 720 MW Mangdechhu HEP. As of March, 2023, there are two hydroelectric power plants (HEPs) under construction, the Punatsangchhu–I HEP with a capacity of 1200 MW, and the Punatsangchhu–II HEP with a capacity of 1020 MW. Bhutan's electricity exports to India in 2021 amounted to INR 2443 crores. The collaboration in the hydropower sector between India and Bhutan is governed by the bilateral agreement for cooperation signed in 2006, along with its protocol signed in 2009.³⁶ Meanwhile, India has become a net energy exporter in the region, but with the only exception of Bhutan. Of late, Bhutan's domestic power consumption has increased significantly, and this has been instrumental in supplementing the possible deficit created by lesser imports from India in the last two financial years, averting any impact on its overall power revenue.³⁷

³⁴*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2023, March). Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>

³⁵Laskar, R. H. (2024, March 22). Modi announces ₹10k crore support for Bhutan over next 5 years. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/modi-announces-10k-crore-support-for-bhutan-over-next-5-years-101711119772944.html>

³⁶*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2023, March). Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>

³⁷Pillai, V. (2024, April 29). *India becoming a bigger net exporter of electricity*. Transmission & Distribution (T&D) India. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from <https://www.tndindia.com/india-becoming-a-bigger-net-exporter-of-electricity/>

Since the 1980s, a major chunk of Bhutan's revenue has come from electricity trade with India, which currently accounts for approximately 40% of Bhutan's total revenue. The tariff for exported electricity has been periodically increased, and it currently accounts for 25% of Bhutan's GDP. India is the primary destination of Bhutan's electricity, to the scale of 75% of the total output. The revenue generated from electricity trade with India has contributed to Bhutan's economic growth, increasing from 6 percent in the early 1990s to 8.7 percent in the early 2000s. This has also helped to balance Bhutan's import payments vis-à-vis India. Efforts are currently underway to export electricity to Bangladesh through Indian grids in order to meet Bangladesh's increasing demands driven by its rapid industrial growth; and this tripartite cooperation will benefit all three parties involved and have a positive impact on sub-regional cooperation too.³⁸

Fin-tech (financial technology) is another emerging area of collaboration between India and Bhutan. The introduction of Indian RuPay Cards in Bhutan was done in two stages, during the years 2019-2020. First RuPay cards issued by Indian banks started getting accepted in Bhutan, and then Bhutanese banks started issuing RuPay cards which were being accepted in Indian markets. This initiative brought total interoperability of debit cards and facilitated Indian and Bhutanese businesses particularly, along with tourists, students, or people seeking medical care. In recent times, formal economic exchange is taking over the age-old informal means at a rapid speed, especially in the remote bordering areas, due to these kind of initiatives. The BHIM application, a home-grown UPI system of India, was launched in Bhutan in 2021 to encourage cashless transactions between the two countries.³⁹

³⁸Pattanaik, S. S. (2023, April 12). Revisiting India-Bhutan Relations. *The Kathmandu Post*. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2023/04/12/revisiting-india-bhutan-relations>

³⁹*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2023, March). Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>

The integration of Bhutan's DrukREN, a high-speed network with bandwidth of 10 GBPS, with India's National Knowledge Network (NKN) represents a noteworthy tie-up in the field of e-learning. This integration enables a network connecting universities, research institutions, libraries, healthcare facilities, and agricultural institutions of the two countries. The DrukREN is currently utilised by 28 active members, including prominent educational institutions and hospitals in Bhutan, serving over 10,000 users. The e-library project, which began in 2016 and completed in 2020, also supports Bhutan's path to digital transformation and e-learning. The project involves developing an e-library portal, establishing a data centre in Thimphu Tech Park, creating and managing e-content and establishing e-libraries in 49 schools and 12 colleges across districts of Bhutan. Additionally, a large number of Bhutanese students receive scholarships from the Government of India to pursue higher studies in Indian educational institutions. India offers several scholarship schemes to Bhutan, including the Ambassador's Scholarship, the Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship, the Five-Year Plan project-tied assistance-based Undergraduate Scholarship, the Nalanda University Scholarship, and the ICCR Undergraduate Engineering scholarships. Currently, the annual allocation of government sponsored scholarships has reached nearly one thousand. Approximately 4000 Bhutanese students are also coming every year to pursue higher education in India through self-financing mode.⁴⁰

India has played a significant role in Bhutan's economic and infrastructure development, even before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1968. In addition to providing funds for the Border Roads Organisation's (BRO) project DANTAK, which was established in 1961 under the reign of the third King, India constructed multiple infrastructure projects in Bhutan. India has built more than 1,600 KM of roads, over 1,800 metres of major bridges, two airfields, high schools,

⁴⁰Ibid.

hospitals, and a broadcasting station. It has maintained the East-West Highway and set up telephone exchanges and microwave links. India has suggested constructing a road through the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan, which would result in a 450 KM reduction in travel distance between two of its provinces, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The two states are currently exploring the feasibility of the Kokrajhar-Gelephu trans-border broad gauge rail link project, which spans a distance of 57.5 KM.⁴¹

3.3.3 Trade

The India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit—which was first signed in 1972 and revised most recently for the fifth time in 2016—is the key document that establishes a free trade regime between the two parties. The agreement also allows Bhutan to conduct trade with third parties without paying any duty to India, effectively offering a free transit passage to Thimphu. It is to be noted here that India is Bhutan's top trade partner both as an import source and as an export destination.⁴² India's trade with Bhutan has experienced significant growth over the past decade, nearly tripling from USD 484 million in 2014-15 to USD 1606 million in the 2022-23 financial year. This accounts for approximately 73% of Bhutan's total trade. India is the primary investor in Bhutan, accounting for half of the country's total foreign direct investment. There are about 30 Indian (FDI) companies currently operating in Bhutan across multiple sectors, including banking, manufacturing, electricity generation, agriculture/ food processing, ITES, pharmaceuticals, hospitality, and education. Approximately 50,000 Indian nationals are working

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2023, March). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; MEA, GoI. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Bhutan_23_march_2023_1_.pdf

in Bhutan in various sectors. These figures clearly highlight the strong interpersonal connections between the two neighbours.⁴³

3.3.4 India's Role in Bhutan's Democratic Transition

India has played a crucial role in the transition of Bhutan from an absolute monarchy to a 'democratic constitutional monarchy'. The drafting of the Bhutanese Constitution, which was adopted in 2008 paving the way for constitutional democracy, was guided by Indian constitution expert and eminent advocate K.K. Venugopal. India helped Bhutan in conducting its first election, the elections for the National Council, in 2007, in terms of training and equipment. The Government of India provided a grant of INR 4.75 crore to the Royal Government of Bhutan to source electronic voting machines (EVMs) from India. Several election observers from India visited Bhutan during the National Council elections, and the two rounds of mock elections before it. The Government of India also provided helicopters during the National Council elections to transport polling officials and equipment to remote areas. New Delhi also helped in organising a workshop for senior Bhutanese bureaucrats in Thimphu on 'Democratic Constitutional Monarchy' where eminent civil servants from India acted as resource persons. Specific election coverage training programmes were also organised for journalists from both public and privately-owned media in Bhutan with the help of the External Publicity Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. With all these, New Delhi has earned much goodwill in Bhutan and has been able to create a caucus among the newly organised administration in the country. Coinciding the amendment of

⁴³*India-Bhutan Relations*. (2024, March). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_on_India_Bhutan_Relations_March_2024.pdf

the 1949 Treaty with this internal transition of Bhutan is somewhat instrumental in providing fresh directions to the time-tested relationship.⁴⁴

3.3.5 The China Factor

China is a significant factor in shaping Indo-Bhutan relations; and Bhutan's geostrategic importance to Indian interests largely stems from this factor. In the beginning, the British were primarily interested in Bhutan as a corridor to establish a trade route to Tibet, pursuing a purely economic objective; and that is reflected in the Treaty of Sinchula, 1865. The inclusion of the clause allowing British India to manage Bhutan's foreign relations in the Treaty of Punakha (1910) was a response to China's territorial claims on Bhutan, which came during the early 20th century. Subsequently, the clause was incorporated into the Treaty of 1949 by independent India keeping the same interests in mind.

Tension in Bhutan-China relations escalated after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1951 and it was further heightened by the anti-Chinese uprisings in eastern and central Tibet from 1954 to 1958. The massive Tibetan revolt of 1959 and the subsequent escape of the Dalai Lama to India, along with the increased presence of Chinese forces near the vaguely defined border, raised concern in Bhutan about potential Chinese threats. During this time, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) occupied eight western Tibetan enclaves that had been under Bhutan's administration since the 17th century. These developments on the borders prompted Bhutan to reconsider its long-held isolationist policy. China's political stance on Tibet had significantly influenced Bhutan's attitude towards India. China's publication of a map in 1961, which changed the traditional Sino-Bhutanese

⁴⁴India-Bhutan Relations. (2014). In *loksabhadocs.nic.in/*. Lok Sabha Secretariat. Retrieved September 19, 2023, from https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/India-Bhutan%20Relations.pdf

and other Himalayan borders in Beijing's favour, raised apprehensions about potential Chinese claims on Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal. Bhutan implemented a trade embargo with China and started strengthening ties with India in response. Thimphu persisted in resisting Beijing's combination of threats and allurements, such as economic assistance and guarantee of independence. Tension further scaled up during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war when the PLA successfully outflanked Indian troops; and the Indian troops, with the help of Bhutanese authorities, retreated through south-eastern Bhutan.⁴⁵

Thimphu, while discreetly strengthening its ties with India, adopted a policy of neutrality on the surface, due to greater worry about China than a strong belief in India's defensive capabilities. Bhutan's confidence in India's ability to protect its defence was shaken after the latter's defeat in the 1962 War with China, which only got restored following India's decisive victory in 1971 in East Pakistan. A bit of normalisation of Indo-China relations in the 1980s and the 1990s enabled Thimphu to engage in direct bilateral discussions with Beijing regarding boundary issues.⁴⁶ It must be noted here that Bhutan's aspiration for international recognition is largely influenced by China's assertive posture, rather than India's interference in its foreign affairs. Bhutan has maintained a sense of doubt towards China since the beginning of 1950s, the time that marks the change in the latter's political structure and policy to the neighbourhood as well as to the outer world. Additionally, due to its landlocked status, the country has established and maintained connections with the international community through India. The typical geography of this part of the world makes India the more viable choice for Thimphu compared to China. Hence, considering Bhutan's current relations with India and its experiences with China, the concern of Thimphu aligning with

⁴⁵Harris, G. L., & Savada, A. M. (Eds.). (1993). *Nepal and Bhutan: Country Studies* (3rd ed.) [Library of Congress Website]. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/entrystd.bt>

⁴⁶Murthy, P. (1999). Indo-Bhutan relations: Serving Mutual Interests. *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII(1). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99mup03.html

Beijing, side-stepping New Delhi, appears unlikely. Though there have been moments or phases of disagreements, none have become a stumbling block so far. Two countries amicably reframing the 1949 Treaty in 2007, is an excellent example of two-way warmth that they share.

The flare up along the disputed border region of Doklam, in 2017, also confirmed India's strong commitment towards Bhutan. Two sides were together while engaging the Chinese PLA which was building up infrastructure into the disputed territory. The status quo has been reported to be restored with the joint effort; but the Chinese are connecting the desolate lands with their main highway grids quite fast. This development exposes Bhutan to a threat of loss of territory which is equally sensitive for Indian defence architecture. Therefore, a warming up of Sino-Bhutan relations, against Indian interests, seems quite far-fetched at this point of time.

3.4 Conclusion

Traversing through almost eight decades of ups and downs in ties now, India's relations with Nepal and Bhutan remain strong. Absorbing the shocks of periodical disagreements and verbal exchanges at times, each one recognises the importance of the other in their development trajectory and stability at large. India is disproportionately large in comparison to both, and in terms of almost everything. This asymmetry sometimes stokes fear of being engulfed by Indian influence in the domestic arena and losing out in the regional space. Naturally, in a collective platform with other smaller nations having the same kind of apprehension and common objectives, these states feel less stressed in dealing with India. In this context, SAARC emerged in the middle of the 1980s; and we must not forget that these smaller states were the strongest advocates of such a grouping. For various reasons, SAARC could not fulfil its mandated goals, which we will discuss later on; but that created a vacuum of sorts in regional politics. Since the middle of the 1990s, as a reaction,

India has tried to bring these states in several multilateral platforms on a sub-regional basis. The smaller South Asian states perceived SAARC as a vehicle where they can jointly put up some counterweight to Indian dominance; on the other hand, India took the grouping as a safety valve where concerns of those smaller neighbours could be assuaged without inviting external intervention or influence. Therefore, regional effort to build up a cooperation mechanism was a necessity for everyone.

When it became inevitable that alternative/s to SAARC was the call of the time, Nepal and Bhutan, along with Bangladesh, had shown enthusiasm in Indian proposal of forming the first sub-regional architecture in South Asia in the shape of South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) in 1997. Since then, these two neighbours have actively participated in other forums, such as the BIMSTEC, as well. In fact, India's bilateral ties with most of the neighbours are now being complemented by multilateral platforms like this, and Bhutan and Nepal have shown great flexibility in adopting and balancing the two. Since 2014, the pace of such minilaterals have only increased, in the backdrop of a completely paralysed SAARC. Though these minilaterals were primarily perceived as SAARC's extended pillars which ultimately would strengthen the parent body, but over time, these have evolved to be important tools on their own. Without Nepal and Bhutan's active participation and cooperation, none of these could achieve anything for India or the region; and it is also to be noted that these two Himalayan states have gained much from such mechanisms as well, such as the infrastructure push under the BBIN. A host of such platforms and their overlapping nature sometimes bring confusion, but there is no doubt about Nepal and Bhutan's role in strengthening India's new strategy of regional cooperation by the means of sub-regional architectures. Strong bilateral ties have only contributed to this effort.

Chapter 4

India's Engagement with Afghanistan and Myanmar

4.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into India's bilateral ties with Afghanistan and Myanmar; two important neighbours of the west and the east. Due to the disputed nature of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) lying between, India practically does not share geographical contiguity with Afghanistan since the Indo-Pak border war of 1947-48; but in political reality, Afghanistan remains extremely significant in India's neighbourhood policy. The consistent, decades-long turmoil in the country and the rise of extremist forces to power several times, bears heavy burden on India's security and regional peace. Afghanistan's location is like a land bridge between South Asia and Central and West Asia, and its complex relationship with Pakistan along with intervention by global powers from time to time—makes it an important piece in New Delhi's quest for a solution to the complex regional puzzle and for enduring stability in the western neighbourhood. Sitting on the opposite, on India's eastern flank, Myanmar holds kind of the same position. Myanmar is the land bridge between India and Southeast Asia, a region offering enormous potential for trading and strategic partnerships. As we have already noted in the previous chapters, India's presence in the South Asian landscape is quite asymmetrical vis-à-vis its neighbours and that makes India's bilateral ties with the immediate neighbours pretty complex; whereas, India enjoys friendly relations and somewhat convergence in strategic interests with the countries bordering these neighbours, such as Iran, Central Asian Republics or the ASEAN states. In such a scenario, it is imperative for New Delhi to engage meaningfully with Afghanistan and Myanmar to stretch its strategic and economic arms beyond the immediate South Asian neighbourhood. In such a context, this

chapter tries to explore various aspects and nuances of India's ties with Afghanistan and Myanmar, mainly bilaterally, but contextualising that in a regional setting.

4.2 India-Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan is a state which is made up of unified Pashtun tribes, established in 1747; and it covers a total area of 652,230 Sq. KM and features a harsh and predominantly arid topography. It is a landlocked country, surrounded by Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, and India (disputed though, due to the POK's presence in between). The country is strategically very significant as a land bridge between South Asia and Central Asia.¹ In the recent past, Afghanistan has experienced prolonged conflict for nearly 50 years; though the causes of the conflict have fundamentally varied over time. The turmoil started with Soviet influence, followed by a direct invasion. Then the resistance movement against the Soviets turned into an Islamist political programme, following the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s. From then on, the stake in Kabul has been claimed by various militant Islamist groups followed by a democratic interlude sponsored by the US-led West. In any case, a peaceful, stable and sovereign government in Kabul has remained an illusion all along.²

As history illustrates, Afghanistan's neighbours have also contributed to the unrest in the country. Their conflicting interests with regard to Afghanistan have hindered the establishment of lasting peace. Since the spread of European imperial ambitions in the 18th century, Afghanistan has been affected by regional rivalries and major power competition consistently, starting with the British and the Tsarist Russia. Afghanistan's ability to shape its modern history

¹Roy, R. (2022, September 5). *Building India-Afghanistan Economic Relations - ICRIER*. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://icrier.org/publications/building-india-afghanistan-economic-relations/>

²Ganaie, R. A., & Ganaie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01489-7>

independently, free from interference by regional powers or global hegemons, have always been hampered by interplay of others over whom they had no control. More often than not, the Afghan conundrum was influenced by the patron-client relationship between different Afghan political and ethnic factions and external powers. External interference had consistently resulted in an escalation of the existing conflicts in Afghanistan, including the last five bloody decades.³ South Asia, by virtue of bordering it, and Pakistan being a major player there, has all along been a victim of the spill-over effects of the Afghan crises since the late 1970s.



*Figure 12: Afghanistan's strategic location like a land bridge between South and West/ Central Asia.
Source: Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies, Kabul*

4.2.1 Ups and Downs in Indo-Afghan Diplomatic Ties

India's Afghanistan policy, particularly following the Soviet invasion in 1979, has assumed that a friendly external power would take on the major responsibilities in Afghanistan's security and political sectors, while India would, if possible, prioritise investments in soft sectors. During the 1990s, India's Afghanistan policy was closely linked to Iran and Russia, as there

³Ibid.

was a possibility of regional strategic alignment among these three states. These states, despite their differences with regard to the ways and means, backed the United Front of the Northern Alliance in their fight against the Taliban; and New Delhi systematically avoided any direct involvement in the conflict.⁴

As it looks from the broader point of view, this policy was likely to last had Indian interests continue to align with the two partners. In reality, it soon became apparent that the Russian and Iranian interests are no more in sync with that of India. In the last couple of decades, Russia has come very close to China and Pakistan, and they act as an axis in most of the South and Central Asian affairs these days. On the other hand, shaking its age-old reservations about Washington, New Delhi came close to it, particularly keeping the ever-growing Chinese influence in mind. Moscow and Tehran were not very keen on supporting India's vision for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled reconciliation process in the post-Taliban era of 2000s. As a result, India's dependence shifted to the U.S. with regard to peace and stability in Kabul, and its continuing engagement with the democratic regime became contingent upon US influence; while both Russia and Iran wanted a US exit from their backyard irrespective of the outcome that might entail.⁵ Around this time, most likely under the US prodding, Kabul was trying to redefine its regional engagement by reimagining the region it belonged to; and India was instrumental in bringing it in the regional space of South Asia, by welcoming Afghanistan to SAARC.

India was one of the first non-communist states to acknowledge the Soviet Union-installed government in Afghanistan following its invasion in 1979. New Delhi provided support to consecutive governments in Kabul until the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s. India, along

⁴Paliwal, A. (2017). NEW ALIGNMENTS, OLD BATTLEFIELD: REVISITING INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN. In *Carnegie India*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6152017_Paliwal_IndiasRoleinAfghanistan_Web.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

with most countries, did not acknowledge the Taliban's rise to power in 1996. Only Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates recognised the Taliban regime. After the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led war in Afghanistan, India and Afghanistan re-established strong ties based on old warmth. India had restored diplomatic relations and provided significant financial aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. Afghanistan is strategically important for India due to its proximity to resource rich Central Asia, as well as being a potential ally in the South and Central Asian theatres. It serves as a gateway to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, India's prospective sources of energy in future. According to J. Alexander Thier, an expert on Afghanistan at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), India aims to secure support or at least neutrality from other countries in the region regarding its conflict with Pakistan. And, Afghanistan, on the other hand, views India as a potential counterbalance in its relations with Pakistan; thus, making a cordial tie between New Delhi and Kabul every way possible.⁶ In fact, Afghanistan's inclusion in SAARC provided India with another supportive voice in the forum in its endeavour of regional cooperation, where Pakistan almost always played the spoiler.

India prioritised establishing and maintaining close diplomatic ties with Afghanistan soon after independence; keeping the existence of a hostile Pakistan between them in mind. A Treaty of Friendship between the Government of India and The Royal Government of Afghanistan was signed on January 4, 1950, aiming at establishing a long-term commitment to peace and friendship. India, since then, has maintained strong diplomatic relations with all Afghan governments, from King Zahir Shah to the subsequent regimes, including those established after the Soviet invasion in December 1979; with the only exception of the Taliban.⁷ The

⁶Bajoria, J. (2009, July 22). *India-Afghanistan Relations*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-afghanistan-relations>

⁷Ganaie, R. A., & Ganaie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01489-7>

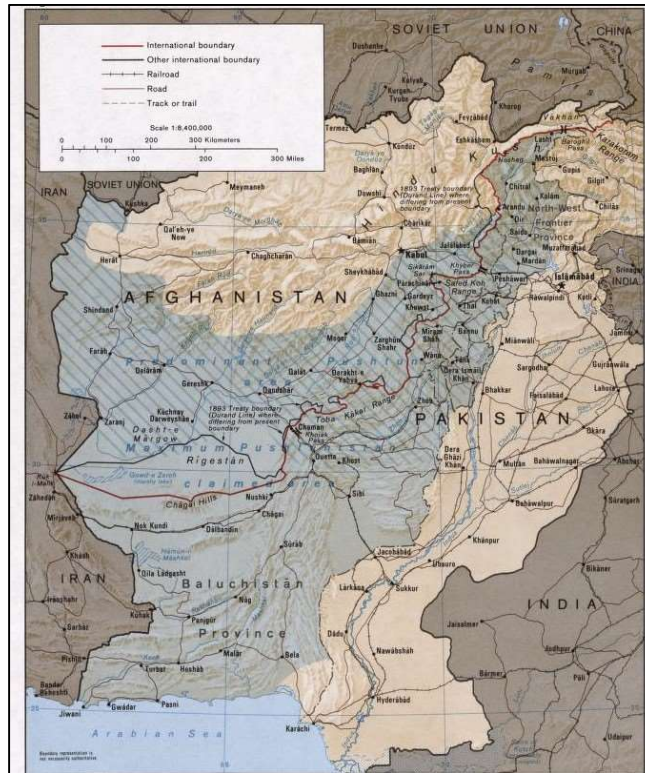
Pakistan factor had contributed significantly to the early consolidation of Indo-Afghan relations. Upon Pakistan's establishment, the relations between New Delhi and Kabul were strengthened due to their shared territorial disputes with Pakistan. Kabul's opposition to the Pakistani stand on Kashmir reinforced the nascent bilateral ties. During the decade of Soviet intervention, India's Afghan policy fluctuated between the principles of non-alignment and the pursuit of geopolitical stability. India initially opposed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops; but soon, taking a 180 degree turn, it abstained from key UN resolutions calling for the complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. New Delhi soon realised that such a withdrawal would benefit Pakistan, as Islamabad had already created a network of Mujahideen factions in Afghanistan. The extent of military aid provided by the US to Pakistan, along with the US's decision to overlook Pakistan's secret nuclear weapons programme, also influenced India's Afghan policy during this period.⁸

4.2.2 The India-Pakistan-Afghanistan Triangle

No discussion on India's relations with Afghanistan can be complete without taking Pakistan into its fold. Pakistan is the closest neighbour of Afghanistan in every sense; these two states are culturally, linguistically, religiously and most importantly socially connected for centuries. Pashtun people are living in these areas, transcending political boundaries, for at least two millennia. The Pashtun people, who are the dominant and majority section of the Afghan state and society, are also majority in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), besides being a sizeable population in the northern parts of Balochistan province. These two provinces are on Pakistan's western flank and share borders

⁸ Ibid.

with Afghanistan; and this 2611 KM long border, which is commonly called as the Durand Line, is a source of long-held discord between the two.



*Figure 13: Afghanistan-Pakistan border.
Source: US Library of Congress*

During the first few years after the partition of British India, Kabul under King Zahir Shah chose to align with India and the USSR, for both ensuring security of his regime and lack of confidence in new born Pakistan. In response to Pashtun ethnic sentiments, he even tacitly supported elements striving for autonomy inside Pakistan, and this resulted in a series of border skirmishes which added more trouble to the already unstable Pakistan. During the middle of the 1950s, Pakistan's coming closer to the US and taking part in US security alliances made Kabul even more suspicious about its territorial ambition and Afghanistan further strengthened its ties with the Soviets and the Indians.

This era of mutual suspicion was changed to a major extent with the ascendance of General Ayub Khan, an ethnic Pashtun, to the top post of Pakistan. Along with Ayub, a bunch of Pashtun military and civilian officers came to prominence in Pakistani administration and society at large. With this, a majority of Pashtuns living in Pakistan started seeing more opportunity in a republican Pakistan than a monarchical Afghanistan still under the control of a select few families. As a result, a proposal of a confederation between the two states got some traction around this time, as the ruling elites of both the nations believed that only confederacy could end all hostilities between the two, and joining forces might get them more leverage in international affairs also. Though they were not totally comfortable to sit together as suspicion about each other's strategic ambition and the political future of the Pashtuns were still concerns; nonetheless, a bond between two states adhering to Islamic principles looked much promising and acceptable than being engulfed by a Christian/ communist superpower or a Hindu majority arch-rival. Declassified American diplomatic cables of this time later revealed such thoughts in both the capitals.⁹ Years later, General Ziaul Haque also nurtured the idea, and even went further, by proposing a larger Islamic Confederation which included not only Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also Central Asia and Kashmir. Such lofty ideas soon lost its track as change came in Afghanistan with the rise of a socialist party with strong linkages with the Soviet Union; and it took a dramatic turn with the Soviet invasion in 1979. All discussions on an Af-Pak political union faded into oblivion with this new security environment.¹⁰

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979, a new theatre of strategic competition between the then two superpowers ensued as the US joined the Afghan stage soon after the invasion. The Reagan administration had no other option than Pakistan to intervene in

⁹Kabul sought Pakistan-Afghanistan merger in 1954. (2017, January 28). *The News International*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/182352-Kabul-sought-Pakistan-Afghanistan-merger-in-1954>

¹⁰Hilali, A. Z. (2017). *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (1st ed.) [eBook]. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235165>

what was going to be a decade-long bloody war, as post-revolution Iran was dead against any American presence in the vicinity and Central Asia was under direct control of the Soviet Union. The Mujahideen were raised, trained, armed and then pushed back into Afghanistan from Pakistani soil; and, in return, the US pumped in billions of dollars to Pakistan for the codenamed 'Operation Cyclone' to take off, and to rehabilitate refugees fleeing the battle zones. India all along remained on the side-lines, but whatever little diplomatic weight it could offer, it did to the Soviet-backed regimes.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the country went through a civil war characterised by religious, tribal, and ethnic divisions. The emergence of the Taliban in 1996, along with its backing of international jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda, was perceived as a threat by most of the regional actors, with the exception of Pakistan. The presence of a fundamentalist Sunni regime supported by Saudi Arabia on its eastern flank was strongly detested by Tehran. Moscow was apprehensive that the Taliban's rise could bolster Islamist secessionist movements in Chechnya. New Delhi perceived the Taliban as a Pakistan-backed group that could worsen the ongoing insurgency in Kashmir. India's Afghanistan policy, around this time, as we have noted earlier, was closely linked to Iran and Russia; and they threw their weight behind the Northern Alliance led by Ahmed Shah Massoud. India consciously chose to avoid any direct involvement in the conflict though.

There was a persisting dilemma in New Delhi about engaging with the Taliban during this time, even in an unofficial capacity. The Taliban's seizure of Mazar-i-Sharif in May 1997 weakened India's confidence in its own policy of a total boycott of the regime. Going otherwise, it had to do a balancing act, as engaging with the Taliban could have resulted in losing diplomatic support on the Kashmir issue and jeopardising its defence and energy deals with Russia, the CIS countries, and Iran. This dilemma lasted very short, as the hijacking of an Indian Airlines

aircraft to Kandahar to free Masood Azhar in December, 1999, killed whatever little appetite India had for engaging with the Taliban.¹¹

Pakistan's Afghan policy vis-à-vis India is clearly influenced by both strategic and tactical calculations. Strategically, it wants to expand its 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and wants to have a friendly government there for two reasons. First, it sees Afghanistan as a turf which could be useful for regrouping in a conflict with India; and, second, conversely, a friendly government to New Delhi in Kabul might open the path to a two-front war with it. On the other plain, tactically, Islamabad suspects Indian embassy and consulates in Afghanistan to be centres of espionage and alleges them of colluding with anti-Pakistan sentiments, such as Pashtun nationalist movements in FATA or Baloch national movements in Balochistan. In short, Islamabad is extremely sensitive about any Indian security overtures in Afghanistan. On its part, India avoided actions that might escalate its bilateral tensions with Pakistan. New Delhi, for instance, though remained committed to reconstruction of Afghanistan since 2001, consciously avoided committing boots on the ground. As India always endorsed a peace process in Afghanistan which was 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' in nature, it did not attempt to roadblock the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US taking off in that direction. Though the QCG initiatives did not yield any results, New Delhi's position with regard to the grouping was a testament of its consideration of Pakistani concerns.¹²

Meanwhile, in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, regional politics in South Asia had undergone substantial changes; first, with the emergence of the SAARC, and then, with the creation of sub-regional groupings minus Pakistan. India's engagement, or for that matter,

¹¹Paliwal, A. (2017). NEW ALIGNMENTS, OLD BATTLEFIELD: REVISITING INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN. In *Carnegie India*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6152017_Paliwal_IndiasRoleinAfghanistan_Web.pdf

¹²The Way Ahead for India-Afghanistan Relations. (2016). In *Observer Research Foundation*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230523111914.pdf>

absence of it, with Afghanistan, as we have noted, was largely conditioned by Pakistan's role in that country. During the same period, Pak-backed insurgency in Kashmir was on the rise and the state was cornered by the terrorists returning from Afghan theatre. Naturally, any regional cooperation mechanism where both India and Pakistan were important parts, was bound to fail. While such a scenario persisted in the security domain blocking regional cooperation at large, India, along with other smaller neighbours were opening up to the market economy and the process of globalisation, registering leaps in the economic field. Without regional level understanding, at least to some extent, such forces of liberalisation would not be able to produce results. Consequently, the new form of economic engagement necessitated regularisation of norms and procedures among the neighbours, to which, almost every time, Pakistan opposed, suspecting spread of Indian influence over the region. Sub-regionalism was, thus, not an Indian ploy to side-line Pakistan from the regional space, rather a necessity for others to go with the flow of new economic world order of the post-Cold War era.

4.2.3 India's Engagement in Post-Taliban Era (2001-2021)

Trade

In the post-war period, the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2003 greatly enhanced the trade volume between the two countries. The free trade regime had decreased tariff barriers on various commodities. The bilateral trade in 2019-20 reached a value of over USD 1.5 billion, with Indian exports totalling USD 997.6 million and imports totalling USD 529.9 million. Impacted by the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the trade figures saw decline in 2021-22. However, trade continued; and in the fiscal year 2022-23, the total volume amounted to approximately USD 889 million. The Zaranj-Delaram highway built by India during the democratic period, connecting the Afghan heartland with the port of Chabahar, Iran, served as the main artery of

bilateral trade.¹³ In 2017, India started an air freight corridor between Delhi-Kabul and Delhi-Kandahar facing Islamabad's denial to allow transit for Indo-Afghan trade. Starting 2020, first the Covid-19 pandemic and then the Taliban's re-emergence derailed such engagement. A host of Indian private companies, like that of KEC, APTECH, SpiceJet etc., which were doing business and took part in Afghanistan's infrastructure build-up initiative, had to shut their operations after August, 2021.

Culture

During the democratic interlude of two decades, Indian films, songs, and TV serials had gained immense popularity among the Afghan masses, playing a significant role in familiarising the Indian socio-cultural value system to the Afghan public.¹⁴ From Shah Rukh Khan to Mahendra Singh Dhoni, a lot of Indian celebrities across different fields have become household names in Afghanistan. Cricket gained popularity during this time, and Afghan players became regulars in different domestic Indian cricket tournaments. India also hosted as home grounds for the Afghan national squad playing with other countries.¹⁵

Indian diaspora

During the peaceful decades, a good number of Indian nationals started staying in Afghanistan and they were mostly professionals engaged in Banks, IT firms, construction companies, hospitals, NGOs, telecom companies, security services, universities, Govt. of India sponsored projects, and in UN Missions. The number was estimated to 2500 during 2017 by the Indian Embassy in Kabul.¹⁶

¹³*Export-Import Data Bank (Country-wise): Afghanistan*. (n.d.). Department of Commerce, Government of India. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://tradedat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecnt.asp>

¹⁴*India-Afghanistan Relations*. (2017, October). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/1Afghanistan_October_2017.pdf

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

Developmental assistance

Since the installation of a somewhat democratic regime in Kabul in the aftermath of the American War on Terror, New Delhi renewed its engagement with Kabul with visible enthusiasm. It sighed with relief when the Taliban were overthrown and an experiment with democracy led by the Afghans began. The US and its Western allies wanted a robust Indian presence on Afghan soil to counterbalance Pakistani influence. Cautiously avoiding the proposal for a military presence, New Delhi engaged the nascent Afghan democracy in developmental ties. Since then, for twenty years, until the retaking of Kabul by Taliban in 2021, India got deeply engaged in Afghanistan in terms of soft power and developmental assistance.

India had always acknowledged the primacy of social and economic development in Afghanistan for the purpose of ensuring regional security. In 2011, Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with India, which established a framework for cooperation in various areas, including political and security collaboration, trade and economic relations, capacity development and education, and social, cultural, civil society, and people-to-people relations. India has committed more than USD 2 billion to Afghanistan since the democratic beginning, of which approximately USD 1 billion has been spent in mass education, healthcare, vaccination of children, etc. This makes India the fifth largest bilateral donor, following the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany, and the largest non-traditional donor. Indian assistance can be categorised into three main types: humanitarian aid (such as food assistance), infrastructure projects, and capacity building. Six projects have been identified as significant in terms of cost. These include: food assistance and school construction (USD 321 million disbursed), supply of 250,000 tonnes of wheat, power grid construction from Pul-i-Khumri to Kabul (USD 120 million), Salma Dam Power Project construction (USD 130 million), parliament building construction (USD 178 million), and

rehabilitation of Delaram-Zaranj road (USD 150 million).¹⁷ Furthermore, India also committed to implement 116 High Impact Community Development Projects across 31 provinces in Afghanistan. For New Delhi, these were low visibility, high impact initiatives which helped make an image of India in the minds of common Afghans living in the corners of the country.¹⁸ Indian NGOs had also taken part in capacity building initiatives of Afghan nationals, especially the women and students, in tandem with the Government of India's larger mission to skill the Afghans to improve their socio-economic conditions. The United States had also allocated USD 3 million to support exchange programmes and scholarships between Afghan agricultural colleges and Indian universities.¹⁹ Besides, India renovated the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health and regularly sent doctors to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar to address Afghanistan's massive medical needs. India annually provided 500 scholarships to Afghan students through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). Over the years, it has been found that India's civilian-centric policies have been widely appreciated by both official authorities and the local population.²⁰

4.2.4 The Rise of Taliban and the Indian Response (2021 onwards)

Establishing a client state on its western border had been a long-term goal of the Pak military establishment; and the Taliban offered a likely scenario to make that happen in the middle of the 1990s. The extremely swift and fast capturing of power by the Taliban could be attributed to both their discipline and loyalty to a cause, and also to Islamabad's help and guidance. The

¹⁷Price, G. (2013). India's Policy towards Afghanistan. In *Chatham House*. Retrieved April 10, 2024, from https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf

¹⁸*India-Afghanistan Relations*. (2017, October). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/1Afghanistan_October_2017.pdf

¹⁹Price, G. (2013). India's Policy towards Afghanistan. In *Chatham House*. Retrieved April 10, 2024, from https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf

²⁰Ganaie, R. A., & Ganaie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01489-7>

Russia-Iran-India trio failed to anticipate such a lightning fast takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, defeating all the seasoned warlords like Massoud, Rabbani, Hekmatyar, etc. Their miscalculation had led them to a situation without any option in 1996, minus putting their weight behind the Northern Alliance, which was basically a combined militia of non-Pashtun tribes led by Massoud. India-Afghanistan official bilateral ties, as a result, came to a complete halt in 1996 and the diplomatic blackout continued till 2001. New Delhi welcomed the democratic setup in the post-Taliban era, and since 2002, poured in significant assistance to the state for its survival.

Naturally, when the negotiations between the US and the Taliban for a peace deal ensued, India expressed its reservations due to concerns about the potential fallout of resurgence of the group to power. However, in June 2022, less than a year after the Taliban regained control of Kabul, India reopened its embassy there and sent a team of 'technical experts' to manage the mission. New Delhi has, since then, unofficially engaged the Taliban, while officially not recognising them. In an effort to maintain its presence in Afghanistan, though India refrained from formally establishing diplomatic relations, it also avoided a complete breakup of communication. The downswing of relations between the Taliban and Pakistan has helped India's efforts. However, New Delhi faces the potential loss of favour among a cohort of Afghans who had previously praised it as a champion of education, democracy, and human rights.²¹ New Delhi has stopped issuing visas to Afghans, starting from students to people seeking medical care, fearing those could be used to flee Afghanistan and take refuge in India. Its funding for the Afghan refugees staying in India for decades have been allegedly reduced. These steps can be seen through the prism of security concerns, or it can be read as messages to the new Taliban administration. History suggests, India has always enjoyed leverage with the Afghan elites and that helped it

²¹Kumar, R. (2023, December 1). Is Modi's India cosying up to the Taliban? *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/1/is-modis-india-cosying-up-to-the-taliban>

sail through during difficult political and security environments. Shutting all doors when the country is facing a severe humanitarian crisis may rupture the ties that India had been able to build with ‘non-political’ Afghanistan during the peaceful decades.

During the peace process or the period of negotiations after 2012, India has consistently declined to send diplomats even to multilateral meetings on Afghanistan that include Taliban representatives. This time, after 2021, that was the first thing to change. Subsequent to the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul, India's ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, held a meeting with the Taliban's Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai in Doha. Soon after, in June 2022, an Indian ‘technical team’ was sent to reopen the embassy in Kabul and the team held talks with Taliban officials. As Afghanistan faces a famine-like situation in the country because of the civil war and consecutive failed crop seasons, India has been providing significant quantities of wheat to the Afghan people in collaboration with the Taliban administration. India's position is driven by a concern to avoid offending the sensitivities of the Taliban and at the same time living up to its carefully built image in the last two decades. As it seems, India's primary objectives in Afghanistan include safeguarding their diplomatic mission in Kabul, maintaining a presence on the ground, and preventing groups that pose a threat to India's interests from operating freely in the country. Meanwhile, in pursuit to live up to its democratic credentials and human rights commitments, it has chosen not to send an ambassador, leaving its diplomatic message clear.²²

India's official stance on Afghanistan is currently based on relevant UN resolutions, such as UN Security Council Resolution 2593. The Resolution, passed on August 30, 2021, addressed the issue of safeguarding human rights in Afghanistan, emphasised the prohibition of utilising Afghan territory for terrorist activities, and called for a diplomatic resolution to the ongoing

²²Ibid.

crisis. Indian Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar informed the Indian Parliament in December 2023 that in spite of a bunch of Afghan diplomats leaving India and taking political asylum in Europe, the diplomatic representation of Afghanistan in India is still intact. On the other hand, New Delhi had shut its embassy in Kabul immediately after the Taliban entered the capital, and evacuated its officials. Though India had sent a ‘Technical Team’ to oversee the humanitarian operations in Afghanistan in June 2022, as we have already noted, it is yet to appoint an ambassador, let alone opening of the consulates in other Afghan cities. Therefore, ambiguity over the official and real status of diplomatic connection persists. The embassy's skeleton ‘technical staff’ has thus far managed the distribution of humanitarian aid, including 50,000 tonnes of wheat, 250 tonnes of medical supplies, and 28 tonnes of earthquake relief aid. The consignments were delivered to the United Nations World Food Programme, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health, and the Afghan Red Crescent Society. Despite such a scale of activities, officially, the embassy remains closed for diplomatic functions, including issuing of visas.²³

One interesting thing to note here, amidst the Taliban prodding, Pakistan initially agreed to trans-shipment of Indian help to Afghanistan. After clearing the first few consignments, in February 2022, it revoked the approval. Continuing the operations, India used Chabahar Port in Iran to send the remaining aid; using the Delaram-Zaranj road to bring it to Kabul. This effort left a mark on the Taliban, which in turn advocated for continued Indian assistance in the country. In fact, India kept its budget for assistance for the financial year 2022-23 to the same tune of USD 24 million, like the preceding years.²⁴

²³Ministry of External Affairs. (2023, December 15). *QUESTION NO. 183 India's Relationship with Afghanistan* [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/37428/QUESTION+NO+183+Indias+Relationship+with+Afghanistan>

²⁴Shende, S. (2023, August 23). *Two Years After Taliban Takeover: What is India's Afghanistan Policy?* South Asian Voices. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://southasianvoices.org/two-years-after-taliban-takeover-what-is-indias-afghanistan-policy/>

In January 2024, India was one of the ten countries that had attended a Regional Cooperation Initiative meeting in Kabul, organised by the Taliban administration. This highlights the increasing interaction between the two parties. It is widely believed that Afghan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai was behind India's invitation to the meeting. Stanikzai has a strong India connection as he received military training at the Army Cadet College of the Indian Army in Nowgaon from 1979 to 1982 as part of an Indo-Afghan cooperation programme, and later again, he served as an officer cadet for 18 months at the IMA, Dehradun. The meeting invitation also followed the Indian Embassy in the UAE hosting the Afghan Taliban envoy during the Republic Day celebrations. In December 2022, Hamdullah Nomani, the Taliban's Minister for Urban Development, met with some members of the Indian technical team in Kabul to discuss the need for revival of Indian projects, invited investment in New Kabul Township, addressed visa concerns, and stressed the importance of providing more scholarships to Afghan students. Around the same time, Indian diplomats have started engaging with Taliban officials in different West Asian nations; and also, on the sidelines of multilateral meetings on Afghanistan, such as the Moscow Format talks facilitated by Russia.²⁵ Therefore, it can be safely presumed that New Delhi is no longer averse to engaging the Taliban, as it was during its previous rule; and, people like Stanikzai, who has an Indian link, can act as the bridge.

4.2.5 Afghanistan in Larger Strategic Calculus

Afghanistan has remained and always will be very important in India's regional security configuration. A client government in Kabul, wholly controlled by Islamabad, is detrimental

²⁵Bhushan, R. (2024, February 5). India-Taliban thaw on Afghanistan: What really is happening? *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indiataliban-thaw-on-afghanistan-what-really-is-happening-101707110103889.html>

to New Delhi's interests. As a result, New Delhi has always been active in maintaining a working relationship with Kabul, except for a five-year hiatus during 1996-2001. There is no doubt that India has earned a lot of goodwill through its developmental and humanitarian projects in Afghanistan during the decades of democracy, howsoever fragile that might be. Its policy, during that period, is suffered by an enormous fallacy of putting the proverbial eggs in one basket though. The Obama administration made it quite clear from the very beginning that it did not want to get entangled in the Afghan conundrum forever. Washington's decision to reduce security commitment or treating Afghanistan in conjunction with Pakistan, naming it as the Af-Pak region, were signs of the direction it was going to go. It opened talks with the Taliban as early as Obama's second term's beginning, starting from 2012. On the other hand, the Taliban also signalled not making the same mistake again of hosting international terror networks. It has been, indeed, much inward looking since its recapturing of Kabul in 2021. While this shift in US-Afghan relations were imminent, India continuously pursued its earlier policy of not engaging with the Taliban. History can be a guiding force in selecting policy options, but it cannot be and should not be a source of permanent aversion and prejudice to a particular actor in international politics. Even Russia had opened channels of communication with the Taliban as early as 2016, and so did Iran. Such rigidity in its approach to the Taliban has made India somewhat isolated in politics around the stake of Kabul.

Evidently, India downsized its operations since 2016, with Ashraf Ghani's ascendance in Kabul; but it did not cultivate the Taliban either, which were fast capturing the vast hinterland of Afghanistan. It became quite clear another couple of years down the line that future power sharing of Afghanistan would not be possible without taking the Taliban into the equation. Come 2021, defying all odds and predictions, the Taliban came out as the only force in Kabul, leaving every speculation of a unity government and such to rest. In reaction, India shut its official posts there and the bilateral relations came to grinding halt like that in 1996. Since then,

India has somewhat reshaped its policy towards the Taliban and continued engagement with ‘official’ Afghanistan through humanitarian assistance, but stopped short of acknowledging it; while engaging the Taliban unofficially. Sometimes, in an effort to not offend the Taliban, it is hurting the common Afghans’ sentiments, the biggest and most loyal constituency in Afghanistan that India has been able to secure in the last twenty years. Given Taliban’s current differences with the Pak military establishment with regard to the Haqqani Network, New Delhi may explore new options and improvise. As S.M. D’Souza wrote in September, 2023, India is practically caught in Hobson’s choice in Afghanistan; where the choice is none but one, engaging with the Taliban.²⁶

A stable Afghanistan is kind of a prerequisite for a stable South Asia, as competitive engagement between New Delhi and Islamabad with regard to Kabul has always acted as detrimental to any regional cooperation. Competing for influence over Afghanistan while engaging in multilateral regional platforms do not go together. Moreover, Afghanistan is also a member of the regional grouping SAARC now, and the association runs on the basis of consensus. Therefore, the question of representation of Afghanistan naturally arises; and, sitting with the Taliban representative at the discussion table of a regional organisation is anything but accepting its legitimacy, which India has still not officially acknowledged. Also, SAARC is an organisation that is run by a top-down approach, therefore it cannot function without summit meetings. True, for the last one decade it has remained dormant; but to revitalise it, will the prime minister of India sit with his Afghan counterpart belonging to the Taliban? In all, the situation can best be termed as complex. India’s engagement with other South Asian neighbours, except Pakistan, is not so contingent upon developments in

²⁶D’Souza, S. M. (2023, September 20). Hobson’s choice for India in Taliban-Held Afghanistan. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/hobsons-choice-for-india-in-taliban-held-afghanistan/>

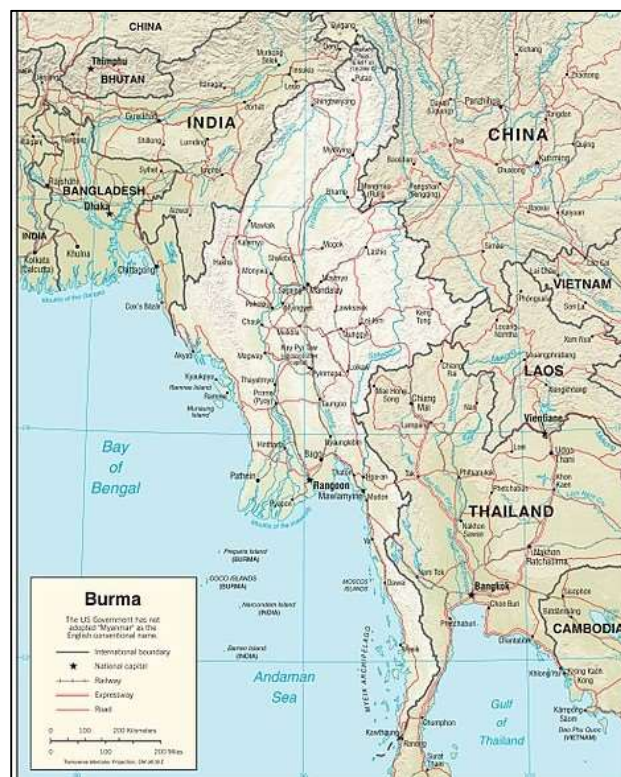
Afghanistan; said that, will they be able to move forward without these two? If they do, sub-regional mechanisms seem to be the only alternative.

4.3 India-Myanmar Relations

The foundation of Indo-Myanmar relationship lies in shared cultural and religious ties. Myanmar, with its Theravada Buddhist heritage, has long looked to India, the birthplace of Buddhism, as a pilgrimage destination. This cultural connection, coupled with geographical proximity—a shared land border exceeding 1600 KM and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal—facilitated trade and fostered people-to-people contact even during the colonial era, when parts of Myanmar were administered as Indian provinces. This historical entanglement also led to a sizable Indian-origin population still residing in Myanmar.

The British era played a significant, but complex role in shaping India-Myanmar relations. The British conquest of Burma (as Myanmar was called then) in the late 19th century led to its incorporation into British India. This brought parts of present-day Myanmar under the same administration as India, creating a degree of administrative and legal uniformity. British policies encouraged the migration of Indian labourers, particularly Tamils, to Burma to work in plantations and infrastructure projects. This resulted in an Indian diaspora settling in Burma, which continues to be a significant factor in bilateral relations even today. In the 1930s, when World War II looked imminent, the British established a clear demarcation of India-Burma border, and made Burma a distinct administrative unit, separate from India, in 1937. British delineated border remains the international boundary between India and Myanmar today. However, in a hurry to secure their prized Indian colony, the British had drawn a somewhat artificial boundary to their best interests, often dividing ethnic groups across the border.

India and Myanmar gained independence consecutively in 1947 and 1948; and both India, led by Nehru, and Myanmar, under U Nu, shared a commitment to democracy and non-alignment. This paved the way for close ties and cooperation on regional issues. The Treaty of Friendship (1951) was worked out to streamline cooperation in trade, culture, and border management. During this time, both India and Myanmar, as newly independent states, shared the same kind of security concerns, in terms of insurgencies along their border, and also the challenge of nation building in their respective multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multicultural states.



*Figure 14: Myanmar in India's eastern borders as a bridge with the Southeast Asia.
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

A military coup in 1962 ushered in a period of isolationism in Myanmar. Relations with India turned cold as the Junta prioritised socialist policies and distanced itself from the principle of non-alignment. Myanmar's focus on self-sufficiency reduced trade with India. Tension along the borders also emerged due to the influx of refugees fleeing ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. In

all, the bilateral ties remained muted and stunted for decades then on; only to get soured during the 1988 pro-democracy movement, for which India voiced support and provided shelter for activists fleeing persecution. India had to change its idealist position soon though, as the end of the Cold War changed international politics forever and it had direct implications for the regional power distribution as well. With an economically strong China with explicit intentions of engaging in regional affairs at the borders, New Delhi had to re-adjust its Myanmar policy. Under the newly launched broader framework of 'Look East Policy', India opted for a middle path in Myanmar; where it officially supported the call for democracy, while at the same time, opened channels of communication with the ruling military junta. This middle approach, balancing the democratic and military forces, continues till date.²⁷

Both India and Myanmar understand each other's limitations while acknowledging the importance of bilateral cooperation, the relation is full of challenges nonetheless. The unresolved ethnic conflicts within Myanmar have internal security implications for India's bordering regions. New Delhi is also worried of China's growing economic and strategic clout in Myanmar that poses a challenge to India's strategic interests in the region. The re-emergence of direct military rule after a decade of democratic politics in 2021, and human rights concerns in Myanmar, have made India to re-adjust its policies once again. Considering its hefty financial investments in recent times, India needs to navigate the politics of Myanmar with adept balancing of the two factions, the democrats and the military, like never before.²⁸

India's relations with Myanmar has gained huge importance in recent times, and it is not solely because of Myanmar's potential as a trading or security partner, rather for its geostrategic location, connecting India's north-east with Southeast Asia. For more than a couple of decades

²⁷Pande, A. (2023, October 26). India's Realpolitik Myanmar Policy. *GIS Reports*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-myanmar-2/>

²⁸Singh, U. B. (2021, May). *Post-Coup Myanmar and India's response*. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/post-coup-myanmar-indias-response-ubsingh-210521>

now, India has come to understand the limited possibility of cooperation in South Asia as a region. It has shifted its focus more to the east over time, as there is massive opportunity for cooperation with ASEAN states which are both economically compatible and also share convergence of political and strategic interests. Being apprehensive about an aggressive China, and to match its economic clout, most of these states are ready to join forces with extra-regional powerhouses such as India. Without Myanmar's active role and support, this India-ASEAN cooperation based on physical connectivity cannot be realised. The way New Delhi has shown interest in the BIMSTEC or the MGC in recent times, or the financial commitment it has pledged to the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, or the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, it is clear that the future of India's regional engagement will be east-bound. To share the benefits of such cooperation to other smaller neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan or Bangladesh, India has taken them along as part of many sub-regional groupings. Therefore, strong bilateral relations with Myanmar is something that India cannot afford to lose considering its regional ambitions.

4.3.1 Economic Ties

India-Myanmar bilateral trade has shown consistent growth since the signing of bilateral trade agreement in 1970; though with some exceptions, especially in the 1980s. Myanmar's fifth-largest trading partner is India. The bilateral trade reached a value of USD 1.76 billion in the fiscal year 2022-23.²⁹ The bilateral trade between the two countries increased from USD 328 million in 1997-98 to USD 921 million in 2006-07, USD 2.18 billion in 2013-14, and USD 2.17 billion in 2016-17. The trade figures have definitely bounced back from the low base

²⁹India-Myanmar bilateral trade may rise significantly once rupee trade settlement mechanism is established: (2023b, June 12). *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/trade/exports/insights/india-myanmar-bilateral-trade-may-rise-significantly-once-rupee-trade-settlement-mechanism-is-established-eeepc/articleshow/100933839.cms?from=mdr>

created by the Covid-19 pandemic, but are yet to reach the previous level. Among other mechanisms, India and Myanmar mainly engage in bilateral trade through the means of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) and India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) scheme. India ranks 11th in terms of investment with an approved estimated investment of USD 773 million by 34 Indian enterprises as on 31st January, 2022. Thirteen Indian public sector undertakings (PSUs) have established a presence in Myanmar across various sectors, with a particular focus on the oil and gas industry.³⁰ Despite the demand-supply complementarity between the two, trade figures remain below potential for a few reasons; like, political instability in Myanmar which offers a challenging business environment, or weak border infrastructure that limits the flow of goods.

Alongside the formal trade, India and Myanmar share a delicate and deep network of border trade since long. This informal trade primarily occurs at designated border 'haats' (periodic markets) and through head-loading across the border. It bypasses official customs channels and involves a barter system or cash transactions in local currencies. Trade basket for this informal trade is more or less the same as the formal one, but with some additions of locally produced goods and cultural token items. Moreover, border *haats* act as hubs for cultural interaction and foster stronger ties between communities divided by political boundaries. Despite its benefits and role in local livelihood, lack of official oversight leads to undocumented trade, making it difficult to track the actual volume and value of goods exchanged. Also, the porous border and weak enforcement mechanisms facilitate smuggling of illegal goods like narcotics, weapons, and counterfeit products.³¹ By building roads, waterways, and upgrading border checkpoints, India aims to streamline the flow of goods and services with Myanmar. A sophisticated border

³⁰*India-Myanmar - Bilateral brief*. (2022, November). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Government of India. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Myanmar22Nov.pdf>

³¹Taneja, N., Naing, T. H., Joshi, S., Singh, T. B., Bimal, S., Garg, S., Roy, R., & Sharma, M. (2019). India-Myanmar Border Trade. In *Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from https://icrier.org/pdf/Working_Paper_378.pdf

infrastructure can simplify customs procedures, encouraging more players to take part in formal trade in place of informal routes. This is easier said than done though. Infrastructure projects often face delays due to factors like land acquisition issues, environmental concerns, and political instability in Myanmar. Also, financing large-scale infrastructure projects with all the neighbours at the same time becomes a challenge for India.³²

Growing trade volume creates economic interdependence, making both countries more invested in maintaining a stable and peaceful political relation. Improved roads and ports do not facilitate trade only, but also strengthens physical and logistical links between the two nations. This enhanced connectivity can foster closer cooperation in other areas like security and disaster management. Successful economic cooperation can create a positive spill-over effect, fostering a sense of goodwill and trust that permeates other aspects of the relationship, as were the case of the European Union or the ASEAN. In the case of India, it brings an additional benefit of containing Chinese influence in the neighbourhood.³³ India's neighbourhood policy is currently largely focussed on building infrastructure with long-term objectives. One can see that most of the sub-regional platforms that India has been able to erect in the eastern neighbourhood in the last three decades are mainly focussed on this particular area, along with people to people to contact; be it the BBIN, the BIMSTEC or the MGC.

4.3.2 Security Ties

Longer borders generally entail deeper security ties, and this is every bit true in case of Indo-Myanmar relationship. The long, shared border and popular proximity create natural security

³²India-Myanmar Trade and Investment: Prospects and Way Forward. (2019). In *EXIM Bank of India*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.eximbankindia.in/Assets/Dynamic/PDF/Publication-Resources/Newsletters/93file.pdf>

³³Pande, A. (2023, October 26). India's Realpolitik Myanmar Policy. *GIS Reports*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-myanmar-2/>

interdependence between the two. Myanmar's stability is crucial for India's own security, as well as its Act East Policy and search for an alternative to SAARC. The invitation extended to Myanmar, the second ASEAN country, along with other BIMSTEC members, to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2019 highlights the significance of Myanmar-India relations and the BIMSTEC in the regional space. It is also the only Southeast Asian state to have a dedicated division in the Ministry of External Affairs, shared with Bangladesh, in New Delhi. It should also be noted that Myanmar's Armed Forces Day Parade on March 27, 2021, just after the latest coup, had representation only from eight countries, including India. Evading its avowed commitment to democracy, India's presence there demonstrates how much importance it places on its ties with Myanmar now.³⁴

Border management

The India-Myanmar border presents a significant security challenge for both the countries due to its porosity. The mountainous terrains and lack of fencing make the border vulnerable to infiltration, illegal immigration, and smuggling. This porosity has historically been exploited by insurgent groups who utilise cross-border movement for operational advantages. The long-standing Free Movement Regime (FMR) allows local communities' limited cross-border movement for trade and cultural exchange. To address this complex challenge, India and Myanmar have instituted a framework for coordinated border management efforts with the Memorandum of Understanding on Border Management Cooperation of 2014. Myanmar's armed forces receive training in India on various professional and technical courses offered by the Indian military establishment. In addition to that, India has been a steady supplier of military equipment to Myanmar irrespective of the regime there, strengthening their defensive

³⁴Singh, U. B. (2022, January). *Indian Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar*. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/indian-foreign-secy-visit-to-myanmar-ubsingh-240122>

capabilities against insurgencies. This kind of defence cooperation also brings some coordination in border management and joint operations.³⁵³⁶

In recent times, there had been a buzz in New Delhi about fencing the border, like the one completed with Bangladesh. During his visit to New Delhi in January 2024, the newly-elected Chief Minister of Mizoram, Lalduhoma, expressed his opposition to the idea of fencing the 510 KM-long borders between Mizoram and Myanmar. He argued that this border is artificial, established by the British, and serves to divide ethnic Mizos; and it should not be reinforced. He also expressed his reservations about the proposal of withdrawing from the FMR, operational since 2018. The 2018 Bilateral Land Border Crossing Agreement permits unrestricted movement of local residents within 16 KM of their respective borders, provided they possess a valid border pass. The border movement regime has existed since colonial times, owing to the close cultural, ethnic, and traditional ties among the border population; the FMR is merely a formalisation of this practice. As for Nagaland, the NSCN (IM) has strongly resented such a decision, as they believe, this may further obstruct socio-cultural exchange between the Nagas on the two sides of the border. They see this as a measure of ‘further split of the Naga family as a nation.’³⁷

Over 40,000 refugees have sought shelter in Mizoram following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. The escalation of conflicts between the three-party brotherhood alliance of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the T’ang National Liberation Army, and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) has led to an increased influx of refugees, including Tatmadaw soldiers, into India. The recent surge in violence in Manipur can

³⁵Sinha Roy, G. (2020, October 20). *India-Myanmar Defence Convergences: Facilitating cooperation and stability*. Centre for Land Warfare Studies. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.claws.in/india-myanmar-defence-convergences-facilitating-cooperation-and-stability/>

³⁶*India-Myanmar - Bilateral brief*. (2022, November). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Government of India. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Myanmar22Nov.pdf>

³⁷Mohanty, S. C. (2024, March 1). Management of Indo-Myanmar Border. *Arunachal Times*. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2024/03/01/management-of-indo-myanmar-border/>

be largely attributed to these developments on the Myanmar borders, and the rival ethnic groups, the Meitei and the Kuki, blame each other for the ongoing chaos in the state. As a result, the situation has come to the delicate point where Mizoram and Nagaland are strongly opposed to the central government's plan to scrap the FMR and fence the border, while Manipur not only supports it but has intensified its demand for the same.³⁸

The security partnership extends beyond land borders, to the maritime domain as well. The Bay of Bengal, flanked by India to the west and Myanmar to the east, is a vital geostrategic waterway. It serves as a critical passage for international trade, with substantial volumes of commercial shipping traversing its waters. Unlike the somewhat disputed land border, the maritime boundary between India and Myanmar was documented and accepted by both sides in 1986 through a bilateral agreement.

Defence ties

India's deepening defence cooperation with Myanmar complements its Act East Policy, which seeks to cultivate stronger political, economic, and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations. The recent political crisis in Myanmar and the ever-going ethnic conflicts pose a challenge to the future prospects of the defence ties though.³⁹ Since independence, Myanmar remains divided among various factions led by warlords, drug lords, and ethnic rebels, resulting in continuous internal strife and clashes with the military. In 2021, a coup took place after a brief democratic period, and it led to the formation of a National Unity Government (NUG) by the ousted political parties (led by NLD), while the actual state control was restored in the hands of the Tatmadaw generals once again.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Sinha Roy, G. (2020, October 20). *India-Myanmar Defence Convergences: Facilitating cooperation and stability*. Centre for Land Warfare Studies. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.claws.in/india-myanmar-defence-convergences-facilitating-cooperation-and-stability/>

On the part of India, successive governments in New Delhi have maintained relations with the ruling military elites, while also advocating for democratic reforms. India established military-to-military contact with Myanmar during the middle of the 1990s, starting with the visit of General B.C. Joshi to Myanmar in 1994. Several exchanges of visits of high-level military officers have taken place since then. Even during the period of democracy in Myanmar, New Delhi simultaneously maintained strategic connections with the military while engaging in government-to-government interactions at the political level. There is a strong support in favour of further advancement and deepening of ties with the Tatmadaw in some quarters of New Delhi, as they see the military as the most capable institution in maintaining stability in strife-torn Myanmar. Without a stable Myanmar where law and order is under state control, India's Act East Policy is surely fated to fail, they believe.

In July 2019, India and Myanmar signed a significant defence cooperation agreement to enhance overall security relations. The deal was signed by the then top military official of Myanmar, Min Aung Hlaing, who happens to be now at the helm of affairs there, after the coup in 2021.⁴⁰ The two neighbours have also engaged in a significant bilateral naval exercise, IMNEX-18, in the previous year.⁴¹ The armies of India and Myanmar conducted two joint military operations, known as Operation Sunrise 1 and 2, to flush out militants along the borders of Myanmar's Rakhine state.⁴² India also contributed to the development of the Sittwe Port in Myanmar's Rakhine state as a component of its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policy for the Indian Ocean.

⁴⁰Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2019, July 29). *India and Myanmar sign MOU on defence Co-Operation* [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1580637>

⁴¹Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2018, July 18). *Joint Military Exercises* [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1539020>

⁴²Bhalla, A. (2019, June 17). Operation Sunrise: India-Myanmar target insurgent groups camp in North East. *India Today*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/operation-sunrise-india-myanmar-target-insurgent-groups-camp-in-north-east-1550835-2019-06-17>

India and Myanmar have engaged in joint military exercises twice under the name of IMBEX (India-Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercise) for better coordination among the forces. New Delhi has also provided Myanmar's Junta government with sophisticated arms, ammunition and equipment in recent times; an action that had drawn flak from some quarters of the international community. The Indian exports, both from private companies as well as PSUs, include barrels for howitzer artillery guns, explosive fuse, etc., which have allegedly been used against civilian targets. According to a recent report by the United Nations' special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, India's arms exports to the country following the coup amount to a minimum of USD 51 million.⁴³ In addition, in 2019, Myanmar obtained a diesel-electric Kilo-class submarine, INS Sindhuvir, from India. This was particularly in response to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand, procuring submarines from China. In fact, in recent times, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Myanmar are aggressively hedging their military acquisitions between India and China, escalating their competitive geostrategic engagement.⁴⁴

4.3.3 People to People Contact

Religion is a major factor in fostering relationships between people; and, Theravada Buddhism, the predominant religious sect in Myanmar, originated in India. As a result, a number of Buddhist pilgrims from Myanmar are drawn to the holy sites in India every year, particularly Bodh Gaya. Cultural exchange between the two nations is also worth noting. The Indian Cultural Centre in Yangon organises film festivals, dance performances, and educational programmes to bridge the intellectual minds. Trade and commerce also play a vital role as an

⁴³Peter, Z. (2023, June 30). India urged to end arms exports to War-Torn Myanmar. *Voice of America*. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-urged-to-end-arms-exports-to-war-torn-myanmar/7159938.html>

⁴⁴Atmakuri, A., & Izzuddin, M. (2020, January 8). Why Myanmar should matter to India. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/why-myanmar-should-matter-to-india/>

important connection among the people on two sides of the borders. The Indian diaspora in Myanmar, estimated to be around 2 million, serves as a link between the two countries as well. Moreover, there is a growing trend of Myanmar's students seeking higher education in India, specifically in technical disciplines. Tourism, albeit relatively small in comparison to other destinations in Southeast Asia, also contributes to the overall picture. For the ease of access and promotion of trade, tourism and culture, the Indian Consulate General in Mandalay was reopened in 2002, while the Consulate General of Myanmar was established in Kolkata. In May 2008, India provided relief materials and assistance in reconstruction to Myanmar after the devastating cyclone *Nargis*. India also provided USD 1 million in humanitarian relief and rehabilitation following a severe earthquake in Shan State, Myanmar in March 2011.⁴⁵

Encouraging people-to-people contact, India has been working on more adept government-to-government networks since the 1990s, regardless of the type of government in Myanmar, and building on the civilisational relationship. The Samvad-II Interfaith Dialogue held in 2017 in Yangon facilitated the gathering of religious leaders, scholars, and students from both countries. Under the 'Maitree Scholarship', the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) provides funding to students of Myanmar to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate courses in India. The India-Myanmar Cinema Forum, established in 2019, seeks to foster collaboration between the film industries of India and Myanmar. The India-Myanmar Traditional Medicine Cooperation initiative aims to exchange of knowledge and expertise in traditional medicine practices. Myanmar has benefited from many training programmes facilitated by multiple schemes, such as the Technical Cooperation Scheme (TCS) of the Colombo Plan, the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme, and several scholarships provided to member countries of BIMSTEC by the ICCR. These scholarships include the General Cultural

⁴⁵Lal, R. (2024, January 17). *Taking a People-Centric approach to building closer India-Myanmar ties*. IndBiz | Economic Diplomacy Division, Government of India. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://indbiz.gov.in/taking-a-people-centric-approach-to-building-closer-india-myanmar-ties/>

Scholarship Scheme (GCSS), the Mekong Ganga Cultural Scholarship Scheme (MGCSS), and the Aayush Scholarship, to name a few.⁴⁶⁴⁷

4.3.4 Connectivity

The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram in north-eastern India share borders with the Myanmar's states of Kachin, Sagaing, and Chin, from north to south. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the British sought to expand their territorial influence and exploit Burma's economic resources by spreading road and rail networks connecting mainland India with Burma. The meteoric rise of the East Asian economies, from the 1990s, have been largely attributed to enhanced economic integration and a surge in physical connectivity within the region. Following lead from these, India and Myanmar also began exploring areas to cooperate with regard to connectivity; especially, both embarking on market-led reforms of their economies in the early 1990s made this step sort of a necessity. The construction of the 'India-Myanmar Friendship Road', spanning 160 KM between Moreh (Manipur) and Tamu, was undertaken by India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) as early as in February 2001. In December 2012, India and Myanmar signed a MoU to construct some parts and upgrade the rest of the Rhi-Tiddim road, to open road links via Mizoram. Tata Motors has established a truck assembly plant in Myanmar which helped increase cargo traffic; while TCIL has connected 32 cities in Myanmar with broadband internet.⁴⁸

The governments of India, Myanmar, and Thailand first mooted the proposal for a road connecting Moreh, India to Mae Sot, Thailand, in 2002. In 2012, the proposal got impetus, with

⁴⁶*India-Myanmar Relations*. (2018). Consulate General of India, Sittwe, Myanmar. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://www.cgisittwe.gov.in/page/india-myanmar-relations/>

⁴⁷*India-Myanmar Relations*. (2013, July). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Myanmar_Relations.pdf

⁴⁸Vasisht, C. (2020, September 8). *India-Myanmar Relations: An Analysis of Connectivity Diplomacy*. The Kootneeti. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/03/india-myanmar-relation-an-analysis-of-connectivity-diplomacy/>

Indian commitment to build up major portions of the road and link bridges for the 1360 KM highway, mostly falling in Myanmar where road conditions remained terrible. This project is known as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway; and the construction of missing stretches which was started in 2017 is now close to completion. A Joint Railway Working Group was formed in 2013 by India and Myanmar to carry out a feasibility study for laying of broad-gauge rail tracks connecting Moreh with Kalay in Myanmar. Since 2014, Air India and Golden Myanmar Airlines have been operating weekly flights on the Delhi-Gaya-Yangon route. Air India also operates round-trip flights between Kolkata and Yangon. The Shipping Corporation of India Ltd. has been operating direct container services between major ports in India and Myanmar since 2014.⁴⁹

The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) is India's most ambitious project so far in Myanmar. The project's framework agreement was signed in 2008. The KMTTP is funded by India and facilitates sea connectivity between Kolkata Port and Sittwe Port in Myanmar's Rakhine state. The majority of the work has been completed as the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the nodal ministry in charge, claims; long after the initial deadline of 2014 though. In addition to the construction of roads in Myanmar, the project covers dredging of the Kaladan River, linking of Kalewa (Myanmar) and Aizawl by road, and upgrade of the Aizawl-Guwahati National Highway; making it a truly multimodal project with sea, inland water and road links which enables north-eastern India to access sea via an alternate route.^{50 51}

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰*Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project*. (2014, April 25). Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://mdoner.gov.in/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project-inland>

⁵¹Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. (2023, May 5). *Shri Sarbananda Sonowal to receive the First Indian Cargo Ship docking at the Sittwe Port on May 9, 2023* [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1922176>



Figure 15: KMTTP plan.
Source: NORTHEAST NOW, dated 13.02.2024

India's growing emphasis on connectivity with its neighbouring countries are driven not only by economic desires but also by strategic interests. In this case, the presence of China in close proximity to India's underdeveloped north-eastern region has always been a point of concern. In response, to make economic and strategic links with the ASEAN region stronger, India began investing in infrastructure in Myanmar. The progress of the connectivity projects is delayed by land acquisition issues, lack of feeder roads for transporting heavy engineering equipment, and frequent disruptions by local communities. The potential spill-over effect of these delays could lead to increased financial costs, and also to a diplomatic slip-up. Hence, it is now imperative for India to prioritise the deadlines of the scheduled projects.⁵²

Moreover, India is on the course of reimagining and redrawing its neighbourhood since quite some time now, and this process has received particular push in the aftermath of the failed SAARC Summit of 2014. The way New Delhi wants to build up physical linkages to the Southeast Asian region and scale up trade and security cooperation with them cannot be done without taking Myanmar in the loop. Without Bangladesh and Myanmar's active cooperation

⁵²Vasisht, C. (2020, September 8). *India-Myanmar Relations: An Analysis of Connectivity Diplomacy*. The Kootneeti. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/03/india-myanmar-relation-an-analysis-of-connectivity-diplomacy/>

India's east-ward drive will halt. These connectivity projects bear immense significance not for India only but also for Myanmar and Bangladesh, as they too would reap benefits by participating in it. With solid physical links, these two states will be able to access the emerging markets of Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, apart from India. These projects can also be seen as a balance to Chinese inroad into their countries, having alternatives in the event of an altered security environment. Shedding the old mind-set of making a conventional regional framework to work, India's repositioning of its neighbourhood policy, on the back of sub-regional platforms, is currently, thus, dependent on its commitment to connectivity to a great extent.

4.3.5 Strategic Significance of Myanmar

The geopolitical significance of Myanmar lies in its location, which is like a bridge between South and Southeast Asia; also, it is the only Southeast Asian country that shares a direct international boundary with north-eastern India, and, a sizeable one, stretching more than 1600 KM. As a result, it works as a hinge in India's much touted 'Act East Policy' and the 'Neighbourhood First' doctrine. Therefore, one can safely assume that Myanmar is an essential and important element in India's neighbourhood policy calculus, which in extension holds much weight in New Delhi's global aspirations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, vis-à-vis China. On the reverse, India is Myanmar's, and for that matter the whole of Southeast Asia's, gateway to the most populated and rapidly growing economies of South Asia. Thus, the importance is sort of mutual. Naturally, given its geostrategic standing, New Delhi wants a peaceful, stable and thriving Myanmar, preferably under a democratic regime; it does not put much stress on the democratic factor as long as other checkboxes are ticked though. More it becomes stable; more India gets a chance to engage Yangon economically to reap political fruits in the long run. A chaotic, unstable, ill-governed Myanmar is against India's every interest both in the short and in the long run; as it will open the possibility of a bigger Chinese

footprint in its domestic matters, and in consequence in reshaping the regional balance. Also, in the backdrop of India not going for the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), the largest free trade zone of sorts being erected in its backyard, the link to ASEAN market through Myanmar could be the biggest relief for New Delhi; economically, as well as in bypassing political isolation.⁵³

India has invested in infrastructure across ASEAN countries to enhance trade within the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. Infrastructure projects, under this larger vision, that are currently being implemented in Myanmar include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral (IMTT) Highway and Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP). The KMTTP aims to establish a direct, round-the-year connection between Kolkata Port and the Sittwe deep-water port in Myanmar's Rakhine state. India developed the Sittwe Port primarily keeping its interests in the Indian Ocean in mind; but this port plays effectively the role of nerve centre in the KMTTP as well. India has also shown intentions to establish Special Economic Zones (SEZ) around the Sittwe Port to solidify its presence in Rakhine, thus enhancing its influence in the Bay of Bengal. The Sittwe Port can be seen as India's response to the Kyaukphyu Port at the tip of China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) which has been developed by Beijing to open an economic and strategic front in the Bay of Bengal using Myanmar's soil.⁵⁴

The importance of Myanmar in India's neighbourhood policy can also be understood from New Delhi's extremely cautious handling of the Rohingya crisis. It consistently avoided a hard-line stance vis-à-vis Naypyidaw in practically all world forums, including the UN and the International Court of Justice. As a democratic country, India voiced its concern about the crisis, but at the same time pushed back Rohingya people who ran towards bordering areas to escape torture. India also refused to give the Rohingyas fleeing the conflict zones refugee

⁵³ Atmakuri, A., & Izzuddin, M. (2020, January 8). Why Myanmar should matter to India. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/why-myanmar-should-matter-to-india/>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

status. This crisis has made New Delhi pursue a nuanced balancing act as another neighbour of India, Bangladesh, alone had to shoulder the humanitarian responsibilities to the persecuted community. Moreover, there was the chance of taking this a religious dimension, which India did not want, as maintaining good relations with both Muslim-majority Bangladesh and Buddhist-majority Myanmar is instrumental in its vision of a peaceful neighbourhood. As a middle path, India helped Bangladesh in tiding through the economic and social burden of lakhs of Rohingyas taking shelter there.⁵⁵⁵⁶

Current political situation in Myanmar poses another set of challenges to New Delhi. India is now carefully watching an expanding rebel offensive by the ‘Three Brotherhood Alliance’ (3BHA) there. This offensive made New Delhi's concerns about security growing, particularly with respect to Manipur and Mizoram, where any Indian reaction to this issue would draw very different responses. The 3BHA is composed of three rebel outfits namely, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA). The Alliance launched the offensive in Myanmar's northern Shan state under the codenamed ‘Operation 1027’ to restore status quo ante of the coup of 2021. It has gained considerable territory and support among common people in the western and northern Myanmar since then. Facing this situation, New Delhi has deployed a dual defensive strategy of supporting the Junta in suppressing the rebellion, while fortifying its border areas to stop influx of both the rebels as well as Tatmadaw personnel. In the midst of international sentiment in favour of the Opposition, India has stood by its policy of staying with the Junta. On the contrary, upon request from the National Unity Government leaders to support their cause, New Delhi restricted its backing only to the level of humanitarian assistance. Though there is

⁵⁵Krishnan, M. (2023, November 21). Myanmar's rebel offensive: How worried should India be? *dw.com*. <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmars-rebel-offensive-how-worried-should-india-be/a-67507328>

⁵⁶Singh, U. B. (2022, January). *Indian Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar*. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/indian-foreign-secy-visit-to-myanmar-ubsingh-240122>

a chance of a major strategic setback if the Opposition becomes able to overthrow the military rule, India is still convinced about the Junta's capability of retaining power.⁵⁷

4.4 Conclusion

Regional policy is not necessarily restricted to the region only. For India, though it does not share borders with Afghanistan any longer and Afghanistan is socio-culturally closer to the Central Asian region, and Myanmar does not fall under the South Asian region, these two states are inseparable from its regional policy. Any significant political development in these two states always had a profound impact in South Asian politics. Pakistan is so deeply connected and complexly enmeshed with Afghan politics that the latter's political developments bear marks on the former, and in extension on South Asia at large. India has walked a long way in making alternative arrangements of engagement with the remaining five South Asian neighbours for three decades now; as it cannot control what happens in Afghanistan and as a reaction in Pakistan or the other way around. An unstable Afghanistan is a virtually an open field of influence for Islamabad, and a stable Afghanistan is not possible without it either. That's a complex puzzle which probably no one knows the solution to; even perhaps the two states concerned. After the 2014 SAARC Summit, the futility of effort in developing a regional cooperation mechanism involving Pakistan and Afghanistan became quite clear. As a result, India's emphasis on sub-regional settings got more emphasis in the last one decade.

On the eastern front, India's engagement with Myanmar is now faced with two major challenges; first, internal political crisis in the post-2021 coup scenario, and second, China's very deep inroad in Myanmar's economy and society. Without Myanmar by its side, New

⁵⁷Krishnan, M. (2023, November 21). Myanmar's rebel offensive: How worried should India be? *dw.com*.
<https://www.dw.com/en/myanmars-rebel-offensive-how-worried-should-india-be/a-67507328>

Delhi's effort to redraw its regional space and consequent engagement with Southeast Asia would remain only a possibility forever. There is no doubt, having its present size of economy and sophisticated industrial base, India can share the fruits of its growth with the neighbours of north, east and south; but the opening up of ASEAN markets through direct, all-weather road and rail links can be a game changer. As we have just noted, reimagining a region has never been an easy task; but continuous economic growth, by virtue of an open access to commodities and services of the ASEAN region and an opportunity to sell their own produces there, can lead the five South Asian states to reimagine their region in line with the Indian vision. In addition to economic benefits, such an arrangement would lessen these states' heavy dependence on Chinese loan diplomacy as well. The way Europe became united after World War II, on the back of economic incentives coupled with a common threat perception, can be a lesson here. Moreover, the sub-regional architectures that have evolved with Indian efforts have somewhat east-bound orientations, and reorienting the neighbours to that direction will only strengthen them to achieve their full potential. Consequently, India's neighbourhood policy, in the context of a reimagined regional space and on the back of sub-regional mechanisms, is quite dependent on its bilateral ties with Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Chapter 5

Regionalism in South Asia: The Rise and Decline of SAARC

5.1 Introduction

Being located at the central position of the South Asian region, India shares borders with all the constituent states, making its neighbourhood the region to which it belongs. Naturally, this puts India in a unique position and begets more responsibility in forging a regional identity or an institution. Convergence of the neighbourhood with the region is not very common, and it is a favourable setting for a regional power like India. Due to the extremely uneven distribution of land, population, power and wealth between India and its neighbours, it assumed a somewhat preponderant role in the region after the British exit from South Asia. This has been challenged by Pakistan from time to time, and the rivalry between the two, over the following decades, acted as the main hindrance to any constructive regional cooperation. The formal regional platform, SAARC, was launched in 1985—but after forty years of existence, it has achieved very little in comparison to other such associations around the world. There have been a few short phases of it gaining some momentum, but as a whole, in the long run, it cannot be said to be successful either. Plenty of opportunities were there, when the association was first mooted; nonetheless, the complex politics of South Asia had made it circling around the challenges instead of exploring the possibilities. As a result, South Asia remains the most economically disjointed region in the world, fraught with a number of political disputes.

Since the mid-1990s, when it became evident that SAARC was not the answer to India's quest for regional cooperation, it went on to explore other avenues, especially in the form of sub-regional mechanisms. With the launch of the Look East Policy, India officially acknowledged the reorientation of its regional engagement. In the last couple of decades, India also started to

reimagine its neighbourhood, without the western South Asia (read Pakistan and Afghanistan), and was on a course to integrate with the Southeast Asian nations instead. In this context, this chapter tries to look into regional cooperation from a theoretical perspective and then put it into the South Asian context. SAARC as a regional organisation is looked at from the general perspective followed by an Indian one. Finally, this chapter tries to summarise the main obstacles in SAARC's path, and how India has drawn its novel policy of bypassing it with the sub-regional instruments of cooperation.

5.2 Regionalism: A Theoretical Exposition

World War II has left a lasting impact on human civilisation in many ways, and one of the most notable changes that it has brought about in international politics is the way states perceive trade and maintain overall relations among themselves. In conventional wisdom until the war, trade was considered to be a zero-sum game where there can be either winners or losers; but the war made states realise that it could be seen in other ways as well, and they gradually moved from a strictly realist attitude to a more liberal one. As time passed, regional cooperation, especially in the form of economic cooperation followed by political ones, came to be a new reality since the 1980s; when a lot of such arrangements sprung up taking a cue from the successful European Community. To be clear about definitional debates, a region can be said to be as, following Holsti, a collection of states that occupy a common space on the world map and have some common identity, territorial affinity and other apparent patterns of behaviour.¹ Also, regional cooperation may be seen as an initiative involving some states belonging to same

¹Holsti, K. J. (1996). *The State, War, and the State of War* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
<https://ir101.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/holsti-1996-the-state-war-and-the-state-of-war-compressed.pdf>

geographical area working together to address challenges collectively that may be otherwise impossible for them to take on individually, as Weigall elaborates.²

Regional integration is preceded by regional cooperation; in fact, the latter is an unavoidable step to the first. According to Haas, regional integration happens when nations shift their focus and political efforts to a central institution that influences cooperation among them. Such initiative builds an overlaying structure above the involved states and evolves into a larger political settlement that unites the nations in a collaborative decision-making process which eventually benefits them all.³ According to Nye, acknowledgment and achievement of shared goals are the primary result of any integration process. These initiatives translate regional cooperation into tangible outcomes.⁴ In the mid-20th century, in a world deeply divided and ravaged by war, significant consideration was given to the concept of regional integration. Supranational arrangements in the form of regional cooperation gained much acceptance and popularity over the concept of territorial integrity as espoused by realist theorists. In this context, the process of European integration emerged as a significant achievement, resulting from the pursuit of converging national interests by states during the Cold War era. The formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) largely stemmed from the shared perception of threat between France and West Germany from the erstwhile Soviet Union. Another factor related to this mutuality was the consideration of economic interests, in addition to peace and security. Almost in a similar way, the integration of Southeast Asian nations occurred with the establishment of ASEAN, where threat perception from an emerging Vietnam and later on China worked as the binding force for these nations. Afterwards, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia also joined the ASEAN. This union of 10 member-states started

²Weigall, David (2002). *International Relations-A Concise Companion*. Arnold Publishers.

³Haas, E. B. (1958). The Challenge of Regionalism. *International Organization*, 12(4), 440–458.

⁴Nye, J.S. (1972). The Strength of International Regionalism. In Günter, H. (Eds) *Transnational Industrial Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.

its journey looking for an economic edge in the face of Chinese goods and services flooding their markets, and eventually went on to encompass socio-political and all other relevant aspects. Presently ASEAN is widely recognised as a highly influential bloc and an efficient regional organisation which has a significant impact on regional and global trade, economy, security, and politics. In addition, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is considered to be the most dynamic free trade area globally; proving Walter Lippmann's prophetic predictions right on the future construct of international order which was to be characterised by the community of states.⁵

Though widely accepted as an alternative and necessary political arrangement, it is quite difficult to forge regional cooperation among a bunch of developing states; as most of the times, these regions are affected by interstate conflicts which have an origin either in identity or age-old political rivalry. The way political aspects of such cooperation are given primacy over and above other important social and cultural issues is another impediment in erecting such a mechanism. A bunch of scholars, in support of supra-nationalism, went quite overboard and proposed surrender of sovereignty at the altar of regionalism in the aftermath of devastation caused by World War II, and again fifty years later, in the name of globalisation. Such arguments made states, especially in the Third World where nation building exercise was still on, sceptical. On the contrary, the functionalist school provided some practical solutions to real-world developments. Scholars like David Mitrany put forward a counter argument to supra-nationalism, and advocated for a more cautious approach. This school of thought upheld the idea of a collaborative approach in achieving common goals, while aligning but not

⁵Niaz, M. T. (2022). REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA: UTOPIA OR REALITY? *Margalla Papers*, 26(1), 108–120. <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/101>

compromising state sovereignty. They argue that cooperation in non-political plains creates a congenial atmosphere where political cooperation becomes possible.⁶⁷

The concept of regionalism has undergone a major change starting from the 1990s. The idea of globalisation has changed the idea of the region to a great extent. Regions are no longer strictly defined in terms of geography, social and cultural affinity, or common institutions etc.; instead it has broadened its scope due to the revolution in communication technologies. Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' has major influence on how we see regions today, and obviously it does not correspond to any closed circuit of communities. As Hettne and Soderbaum suggest, regions are not fixed and inherent geographic entities, but to the contrary, it is a social construct that is shaped and reshaped continuously through other major global events. Soderbaum also argues that regions come to life through our discussions and thoughts about them.⁸ Regional organisations, reflecting this intellectual trend, have started disregarding traditional regional boundaries since the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War world has seen dramatic changes in every aspect of life and the newly emerged political reality necessitated a new set of political arrangements, where the idea of regional cooperation could not remain static. Therefore, according to Fawcett, the concept of regionalism had to be seen through a new lens which is able to comprehend its changing manifestations.⁹ This is even more significant for regionalism in the developing world where states had gone through strong winds of change in the post-Cold War era, since the late 1980s.¹⁰

⁶Gill, D. M. (2020). Challenges to Regional Cooperation in South Asia: An Overview. *Journal of International Affairs*, 3, 42–51. <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/joia/article/view/29081/23580>

⁷Mitrany, David (1975). *The Functional Theory of Politics*. Martin Robinson.

⁸Soderbaum, F. (2003). Introduction: Theories of new regionalism. In F. Soderbaum & T. M. Shaw (Eds.), *Theories of new regionalism: A Palgrave reader*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹Fawcett, L. (2005). Regionalism from a historical perspective. In M. Garrell, B. Hettne & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Global politics of regionalism: Theory and practice*. Pluto Press.

¹⁰Paul, A. (2020). Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Exploring the Three Pillars of Regionalism and their Relevance. *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, 01(02). <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2717541320500084>

5.3 An Overview of Regionalism in South Asia

Regionalism is commonly understood as a process in which a group of states within a specific geographical area, with a shared history, voluntarily agree to adhere to some self-imposed regulations and work collectively towards common objectives in the international arena. It is generally based on cooperation through the mechanism of a bunch of multilateral institutions built upon mutually agreed conditions. Though it sometimes may take the character of a supra-national organisation, but more often it remains within the limit of inter-governmental collaboration only. A shared identity and prospects of economic gains through cooperation are two driving factors for establishment of such an institution which eventually promotes and aims to achieve political harmony among member nations.¹¹

It is to be noted that some sort of transcendence of national boundaries is an essential requirement to go for any regional cooperation; and the potential for such an association mainly depends upon the member states' strength and effectiveness of their political structure. Lack of structural resilience of the member states and dispute over territory among them are two main hurdles in the path of creating a viable regional cooperation mechanism. Now if we look at South Asia through this lens, the prospect of an effective and dynamic association does not look bright. South Asian states are plagued with problems of internal political instability, regime induced violence or drastic regime change, lack of democratic foundations, lagging economic vitality and ideological or religious extremism. Cross-border as well as internal terrorist activities, illegal migration, illicit trade of arms and contrabands, rapid decline of environment etc. are some formidable challenges that roadblock any honest effort to build up a connected and united South Asia. Most states are ill-equipped to provide even the net of basic human security over their citizens and quite often fall short of political legitimacy too, thus

¹¹Ibid.

creating internal political instability which frequently has spill over effect to the neighbours and ultimately challenges the overall peace and security of the region.¹²

The strategic landscape of South Asia is characterised by some ongoing conflicts, and relations among the states of the region are largely shaped by their security concerns. Two major states, India and Pakistan are engaged in a never-ending arms race and both have nuclear capabilities which put the security of the region forever challenged. India started its nuclear programme aiming to neutralise the Chinese threat, whereas Pakistan did the same to deter any Indian attack upon it. Islamabad became more reliant on its nuclear power in recent decades in the face of New Delhi's expanding political clout and increasing conventional military dominance. This has been the basic determining factor for a chronic lack of trust, and this thwarts any direction that South Asia could have achieved as a region. In the post-Cold War era, trans-border crimes and use of terrorism as a political tool have increased, leading to more trust deficit among member states, especially between the largest two, India and Pakistan.¹³

In the beginning of the 1980s, the then President of Bangladesh, General Ziaur Rahman first floated the idea of a cooperation mechanism in South Asia. His idea was readily embraced by smaller nations of the region, namely Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. It is true that while proposing an institutional framework for cooperation among South Asian nations, Zia considered various hurdles that the proposed initiative might face; but he stressed upon the potential benefits it could achieve for the members. As we have just noted, due to their mutual lack of trust heavily burdened by security concerns, both India and Pakistan were hesitant to join any such effort at first. New Delhi assumed this regional grouping might be a vehicle for the smaller neighbours to assert themselves over it, collectively, and Islamabad might stoke the

¹²Rahman, A. (2009). Common Challenges Facing South Asia: A Perspective from Bangladesh. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 9–22). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

¹³Ibid.

fire. On the other hand, Pakistan suspected this to be a ploy of India to corner it in the neighbourhood and an instrument of flexing its military and economic muscle.¹⁴

South Asia is a region infested with long-standing political differences which have a military dimension. Having two nuclear states which are perennially opposed to each other and a third extra-regional power (China) with massive military and economic might at the border, has developed a unique security environment and unconventional strategic culture in South Asia. Security considerations cast a shadow over every other aspect of national interest of all states in the region, and relegated economic, social, cultural relations to second tier. Unlike most other regions across the globe, South Asian states' primary focus remains on security while formulating national policies or even developmental goals. The Muslim takeover of India, followed by the British colonial rule and independence at the cost of partition are historical milestones that have made the regions' history extremely complicated; and, regrettably, the states as well as important non-state actors of the region have securitised this whole complex dynamic. Also, there is probably no other region in the world where security has got intertwined with religion and culture, making an explosive blend of identity politics. The major manifestations of this intricate security dynamics include interstate conflicts, proxy wars waged within states, an ongoing arms race, political interventions, and an enduring human insecurity. Not surprisingly, thus, the combined military force of the six major regional countries is almost five million (estimated to approx. 4,922,000), excluding the second-line forces.¹⁵

There are significant opportunities for collaboration in the areas of economy, counter-terrorism, climate change, and environmental degradation. However, a host of issues do not allow South Asia to integrate, ranging from global to regional levels. Regional cooperation is rooted in the mutual dependence and shared interests of nation-states. Hence, facilitating reciprocated trade

¹⁴Niaz, M. T. (2022). REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA: UTOPIA OR REALITY? *Margalla Papers*, 26(1), 108–120. <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/101>

¹⁵Ibid.

and eliminating trade barriers could be a game changer and prove beneficial for all the members. A relatively well-connected trade network among the member states can pave the way for political goodwill which can translate into broader cooperation in the long run. Of late, the Indo-Pacific region, including South Asia, has become a theatre of big power politics (particularly between the US and China), and as a result, the region is facing more than its natural share of problems. India and Pakistan have and always had their differences, but the emerging trend of two nuclear capable neighbours siding with two rival big powers is somewhat resembling the Cold War days. The former Prime Minister of India I.K. Gujral emphasised the need for cooperation in South Asia citing the massive population it housed, and suggested that only deep economic connection and its end product, enduring peace and stability, could save the region from reaching a nuclear flashpoint.¹⁶

The type of constellation of states in South Asia is undoubtedly complex. India, Pakistan, and the other SAARC member states, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, differ significantly in terms of population, territory, military strength, technological advancement, infrastructure, and political influence. Some of them are really small in terms of economy, size and population, while some others are misconstrued as small by the outside world; the prime example being Bangladesh. Bangladesh's population is more than 160 million and it has a booming economy and with regard to size, it is larger than most of the EU countries. Even with an approximately 30 million population, Nepal is significantly bigger than a lot of EU or ASEAN states.¹⁷ The region has a diverse cultural landscape as well; and it has faced numerous conflicts centred around language, religion, ethnicity and so on. The region has endured several bloody conflicts, except for the Indo-Pak wars, at the domestic level,

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

such as the Khalistani movement in Indian Punjab, ethnic separatist movements in India's north-east, or the ongoing insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, Pashtun, Sindhi and Baloch nationalist movements in Pakistan, Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, Lhotshampa and Madheshi crises in Bhutan and Nepal respectively, and many other smaller ones in different parts of the region. With external influences and changed security configuration of South Asia post-9/11, the issue of internal political conflicts and proxy wars have only aggravated.¹⁸

Drawing on the discussion so far, therefore, we can safely identify the three most important hurdles in the path to regional cooperation in South Asia. First, South Asia is an extremely heterogeneous region and it does not have a 'common enemy' or 'threat' to drive the states to act together. Some states of this region are secular, while others theocratic; some are governed by elected governments, while some others by monarchs or the military. Moreover, from the time of independence (of these states), which mostly coincided with the onset of the Cold War, different states sought patronage from different global powers, cutting a deep wedge among them. Homogeneity among the member nations has contributed greatly in the formation and consolidation of the European Union. Similarly, threat perception from a common source (China) has nudged the Southeast Asian states to come closer and form the ASEAN. Incidentally, South Asia lacks both.

Second, intra-regional conflicts and heavy militarisation are always damaging to any regional cooperation. South Asia has been inflicted with several such conflicts; most notably between nuclear armed India and Pakistan. Also, there are countless internal movements and insurgencies, more often than not, with the tacit support of a neighbour, which have resulted in deep trust deficit. There are multiple ongoing conflicts in South Asia that are characterised by

¹⁸Rahman, A. (2009). Common Challenges Facing South Asia: A Perspective from Bangladesh. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 9–22). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

high intensity, involving proxies and acts of terrorism. These conflicts have had a detrimental impact on the stability and peace of the region.

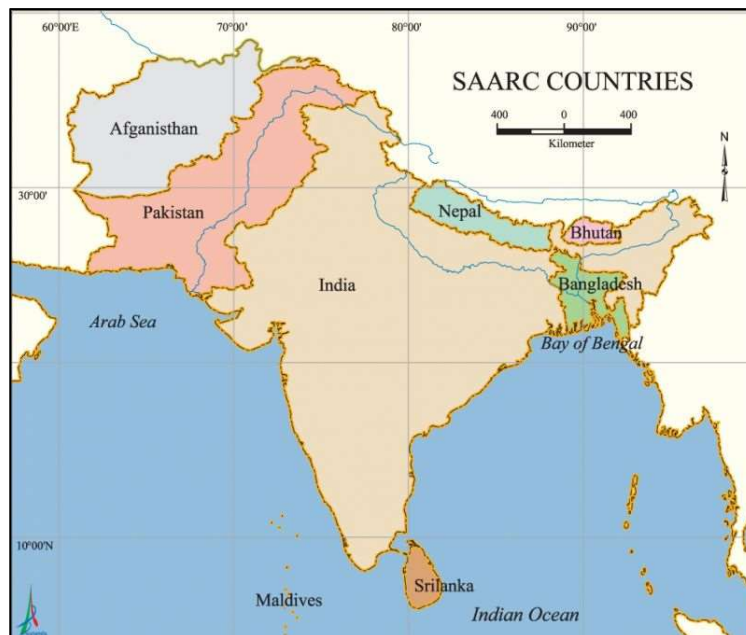
Third, this region has been a zone for competitive influence between the US and the USSR during the Cold War; the former favouring Pakistan and the latter India. After the Cold War, the situation improved temporarily. During the 1990s, Pakistan saw a decade of democracy and took efforts to make amends with India, but this phase was very short-lived. The carnage of 9/11 brought the US back to the theatre, and the US operation in Afghanistan made the whole region unstable again. The chaos intensified with the US forces leaving Afghan soil and the Taliban's ascendance since 2016. The disorder in Afghanistan had a spill-over effect in Pakistan, which by then was heavily dependent on China, the global power on the borders and interested in the region. On the other hand, to contain the rise of Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, Washington came closer to New Delhi. As a result, a climate of strategic competition like the Cold War days remains strong in the area. This kind of big power rivalry coupled with regional enmity of their client states is totally counterproductive for any regional cooperation.

5.4 SAARC

The establishment of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was the result of quite a long process that included meticulous planning and rounds of deliberations among the member states. The idea was first mooted in 1980 by the then Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman, and it took five years then to get to the point of first summit and endorsement of the charter. In May 1980, a letter proposing a regional cooperation mechanism under the banner of SARC (initially it was conceptualised as the South Asian Regional Cooperation) was sent by Zia to all other heads of the state/ government. In November same year, a concept document named 'Bangladesh Working Paper', highlighting the need and potential for coming

up together at the regional level, was drafted and distributed among the seven South Asian states. The document pointed out the possible areas of cooperation considering the ongoing hostilities among different member states; but, stress was given more on commonalities like a common history, natural/ popular linkages, social and economic underdevelopment, lack of capital for economic growth and other shared challenges rather than bilateral disputes.

Foreign secretaries of the seven states convened their first meeting to give direction to the proposal in 1981 in Colombo, and that was followed by a meeting at the ministerial level. The foreign ministers of these countries met in 1983 in New Delhi, and drew up the basic outline identifying the areas of cooperation and the ways to implement it. The first summit was held in Dhaka in December 1985, where the heads of the states or the governments of component seven states extended their commitment to the organisation in a spirit of friendship, trust and mutual understanding. The declaration is commonly called the 'Dhaka Declaration' and was released on 8th December, 1985; also, the SAARC Charter was adopted and the principles of cooperation were finalised by the signatories.



*Figure 16: SAARC after 2007.
Source: Banglapedia*

The charter focused on the following major points:

1. Sovereign equality,
2. Territorial integrity,
3. Political independence,
4. Non-interference in internal matters of member states,
5. Mutual benefits through promotion of peace and cooperation,
6. Adherence to the UN Charter and principles of non-alignment, and,
7. Promotion of economic, social, technical cooperation along with cultural similarities.

The establishment of SAARC, as stated in the Charter, aimed to serve as a platform for the governments of South Asia to engage in negotiations and address their mutual differences, with the ultimate goal of promoting public welfare and fostering mutual benefit and development for all. Economic growth, social advancement and cultural development were the three principal pillars of cooperation under the organisation.¹⁹

In contrast to most of the other regional organisations, SAARC has essentially followed a top-down approach since its inception. In place of various committees and specialist arms like that in the EU or ASEAN, SAARC is almost totally dependent on Summit Meetings for direction and motivation. In addition to the summits, the Council of Ministers (COM) offers another platform for political action. Ministers from different departments convene regularly to develop strategies, evaluate the outcomes of past initiatives, identify potential areas for collaboration, and, if needed, adopt new approaches and mechanisms. Resolutions approved at the summits and/ or by the Council of Ministers are subsequently managed and executed by various committees, including Standing Committees composed of senior representatives from the

¹⁹Khan, A. R. (2015). Impediments to the Success of SAARC. *South Asian Studies*, 30(1), 291–302.
https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/19%20Ahmad%20Raza%20Khan_30_1.pdf

relevant ministries, the SAARC Secretariat, Technical Committees, and their derivative, Action Committees.²⁰

Customarily, a summit meeting is supposed to be held every alternate year in different member states, following a sequential order; but a host of such meetings had to be cancelled due to differences among the members. Moreover, with a very limited real outcome so far, the summits are criticised to be mere public relations (PR) exercises by the leaders of the member states. For an organisation reliant on a top-down approach, this does not go well; though, this criticism is only half true.

SAARC Summits have consistently served as a platform for parallel bilateral discussions and conflict resolution, which holds significant importance for the parties involved as well as for the entire region. The charter does not allow bilateral issues in the SAARC deliberations; but, the opportunity to gather together at the top-level during summit meetings has been utilised by the belligerent sides to sit together. In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks in 2008, senior officials from India and Pakistan convened for the first time at the 2009 SAARC Congress in Colombo. This shows the importance of having a larger and neutral forum in the region which can act as a platform to get two states like India and Pakistan to talk, which seemed otherwise impossible at that point of time.²¹

5.4.1 Economic Integration under SAARC

With the establishment of SAARC in 1985, South Asia started walking towards regional integration through a bunch of institutions and a host of innovative mechanisms. In fact, in the past four decades, South Asian nations had experienced significant changes in the economic

²⁰Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

²¹Ibid.

domain and effectively became a part of the global economy. Regional dynamics have evolved over time due to the implementation of different institutional mechanisms. Interestingly, though several institutions are dedicated to implementing such changes in the region, their progress is disappointingly sluggish on a collective level. The creation of SAARC eventually led to the establishment of South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1995, aimed at promoting regional cooperation through trade. Following SAPTA, the negotiations for a free trade agreement was initiated, and in 2004, in the Foreign Ministers' meet in Islamabad, the draft of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) was accepted and signed. The SAFTA came into effect on 1st January, 2006, following the ratification by the signatories.²² By signing this agreement, the member countries' governments pledged to adhere to a specific roadmap for easing cross-border trade (with the goal of doing away with all customs charges by 2015), standardisation of product testing protocols (which continues to be a significant obstacle to trade amongst SAARC states), and stepping up collaboration on the cross-border transport/ transit infrastructure issues.

The SAFTA took care of the contentious subject of special treatment for the least developed member states, which had previously been addressed within SAPTA. Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Nepal were granted special conditions and concessions in order to achieve the deadlines stipulated by SAFTA.²³ Though SAFTA was launched with much fanfare, it had two serious drawbacks from the beginning. First, its scope was limited to trade in goods only, services was kept outside its ambit (though it was included later on); and, second, though by name it was a free trade agreement, stringent conditions on various aspects of trade had been stipulated. These conditions included limited tariff reduction offers, the exclusion of numerous

²²Agarwal, T. (2014, September). *Regional cooperation in South Asia – Benefit to all*. BRIEF India. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.briefindia.com/regional-cooperation-in-south-asia-benefit-to-all/>

²³Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

items through the negative lists, and extended time-frames for tariff liberalisation; and these are clearly in violation of the spirit of the agreement. To reach the goal of a prospective economic union, the developed states need to take the lead to unite the economies of the region, and for that, barriers to trade liberalisation must be removed with stricter deadlines.²⁴

Even after almost four decades of SAARC, three decades of SAPTA, and two decades of SAFTA, the regional trade in South Asia is only around 10% under this free trade agreement route. In the financial year 2013-14, the total amount of trade flows within SAARC under the SAFTA was a meagre (approximately) USD 3 billion. This is in contrast with intra-regional trade, which accounts for approximately 65% of all trade within the European Union, 51% within the region covered by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), 26% within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and 16% within the Mercosur trade bloc in Latin America. The largest economy in the region, India, is deeply engaged in trade relations with all member states of SAFTA, even though it accounts for a little over 5% of India's total foreign trade. Situation is extremely asymmetrical with regard to FDI as well. For example, in 2012, India attracted 84% of the total FDI that came to the region, while Nepal received only 0.16%. The ambitious roadmap of converting SAPTA into SAFTA, further into South Asian Customs Union, and finally into South Asian Economic Union is running in a pathetically slow pace; and, South Asian countries will need to address not only non-economic factors like building political will and confidence, but also some purely economic ones like trade facilitation and infrastructure development on an urgent basis.²⁵

In contrast to the ASEAN region, where intra-regional commerce makes for more than a quarter of overall trade, South Asia's intra-regional trade accounts for a mere 5% of total trade.

²⁴Agarwal, T. (2014, September). *Regional cooperation in South Asia – Benefit to all*. BRIEF India. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.briefindia.com/regional-cooperation-in-south-asia-benefit-to-all/>

²⁵Lok Sabha Secretariat. (2017). "SAARC": ITS IMPACT AND FUTURE. In *loksabhadocs.nic.in*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/SAARC_Its_impact_future.pdf

Currently, trade between South Asian nations is only worth USD 23 billion, a significant amount less than the predicted attainable value of at least USD 67 billion. Due to border issues, trading with Brazil is roughly 20% cheaper for an Indian company than with a nearby South Asian nation. Inadequate road, rail, maritime, and air transportation facilities are only a few of the issues that have restricted trade from reaching its full potential. Protective tariffs, actual and perceived non-tariff barriers, investment limitations, and a general lack of trust across the region are further impediments.²⁶ India has significant trade potential with all of its neighbouring countries, and it also has the ability to play the role of facilitator among them. It has been often noted that South Asian countries may not be naturally interested to engage in trade with each other due to their limited trade complementarities, resulting in a pessimistic view of formal trade. Nevertheless, there exists a significant amount of informal trade. It is widely believed that informal trade in South Asia surpasses formal trade in terms of volume. The existence of multiple barriers and complex regulations that limit formal trade, and high costs associated with official cross-border trading have led to the emergence of informal trade across all borders.²⁷

It is fascinating to see that, with the advent of modern communication technologies like cell phones, satellite phones, internet and international digital payment systems, although official trade in the region has not increased significantly, illicit trade has. The illegal trade, which avoids the high trade barriers between South Asian states and the convoluted customs and transit processes, is reaping large profits substituting formal trade. The volume and direction of unrecorded cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh were found to follow the official trade pattern, according to an analysis of unofficial trade between the two countries.

²⁶*Why South Asia? Trade*. (2022). World Bank. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade>

²⁷Ahluwalia, I. J. (2003). Economic Cooperation in South Asia. In *Japan International Cooperation Agency*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/IFIC_and_JBICI-Studies/jica-ri/english/publication/archives/jbic/report/paper/pdf/rp16_e09.pdf

The volume of illegal imports into Bangladesh from India, primarily consisting of fruits, vegetables, spices, pharmaceuticals, and animals, was nearly equal to that of legal imports according to a World Bank study conducted in 1997. Again, the value of illicit commerce between Pakistan and India via third countries is roughly two to four times greater than that of their formal trade. Regarding the unauthorised commerce between India and Nepal, a similar tendency can be seen. Large losses have been incurred by governments as a result of these parallel trade routes, and it also goes missing in national audits and estimates. In light of this, it would be prudent to study and comprehend the factors and modalities that lead to such a high amount of illegal/ informal trade and how they succeed where official efforts do not. It is perhaps practical to learn lessons from this sector and use some of their ethical techniques in official trading.²⁸

If the SAFTA had included stricter deadlines for removal of non-tariff barriers and set aside a fund to compensate the smaller economies to weather the initial turbulence, it would probably be closer to its goal now. Moreover, this has to be complemented with infrastructure development across borders for efficient movement of goods. For services, easy visa policy for professionals and cheap land and air connectivity are necessary. After two decades, it now seems SAFTA lacked the broader vision of integration, and emphasised more on piecemeal reforms. Lacking a wider outlook and a long-term approach, the agreement was probably destined to be a failure. Without deep and mutually beneficial economic linkages, as has been seen worldwide, political cooperation also becomes difficult. It is the benign route of trade and commerce that often lead to smooth sailing through the rough sea of politics.

²⁸Ibid.

5.4.2 Political Cooperation under SAARC

The history of South Asian states is extensively and intricately linked. Despite political upheavals from time to time, the countries within the region are actually closer to one another at the core, in terms of culture, race, and religion, than apparently seems. The British Empire had a lasting impact in this regard as it encompassed almost the whole region and had been able to establish a common political and administrative structure based on rule of law. Cross-border parallels in traditions, languages, and social practices are historically common and became more apparent with the growth of new-age linkages in the form of physical and technological infrastructure. Therefore, it is not totally impractical to look for a common South Asian identity. However, history does not hold only commonalities but also conflicts and rivalries. Though there is a great deal of potential for regional cooperation and economic interdependence, rivalries such as between India and Pakistan hamper them. Moreover, the region saw different styles of state functioning since the mid-1950s. Pakistan, Bangladesh went through long phases of military rules, whereas Nepal and Bhutan saw monarchy just a couple of decades ago. Sri Lanka and the Maldives underwent strongman rules, where India remained committed to democracy.²⁹

It is a general wisdom that democratic states tend to maintain better relations among them, and try to avoid or check escalation in conflicts. There is a momentum in favour of democracy across the South Asian region in recent times, but it shines more on paper than in real life. As a result of the states' struggle for resource allocation, mobilisation, and effective policy implementation, these democracies are in the process of constant shaping and reshaping. Other than India, these states are still far from establishing democracy in true sense due to corruption, criminalisation of politics, and ethno-cultural divisions in their society. Even India is not free

²⁹Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

from all these vices. True, the prospect of democracy now looks brighter in South Asia than any past point in history, mainly due to liberalisation of markets and ascent of a conscious civil society; still, it is a long way to go. Sporadic political instability and violence make the scenario quite difficult even now. For example, Bangladesh has just gone through a turbulent period in the pre and post-election months as the two major opposition parties refused to take part in the elections. Sri Lanka is still tiding over a devastating financial crisis of 2022. Nepal could not install a stable government since 2008's constitutional reforms. Pakistan is in a political mess, despite the recently concluded national elections, and economically it is almost on the verge of bankruptcy; but there seems to be no respite in the constant struggle for power between Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Thus, the overall situation is not what it looks like from the above. Personality cult, bureaucratic domination, the rent-seeking nature of social forces, governmental repression, and a lack of accountability are factors that stand in the way of establishment and working of truly modern, democratic states in South Asia.³⁰

The human development indices of most countries in South Asia are far from impressive, including India. Despite liberalisation of economies and a shift towards market-led development, the economic growth is stifled for most of these states. It is, therefore, not very surprising that these countries failed almost entirely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Without a viable regional platform which can work towards integration of the region's economies, it is quite impossible to attain such human development targets. Undoubtedly, efforts have been made to right the old wrongs and SAARC was rejuvenated for a period during the latter half of the 2000s. With the addition of Afghanistan as the 8th member and nine observers (including China), a fresh push was given after 2008. Some notable achievements were also reached during this time, like the SAARC Food Bank, SAARC Development Fund,

³⁰Rahman, A. (2009). Common Challenges Facing South Asia: A Perspective from Bangladesh. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 9–22). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

South Asian University, negotiations to include services in SAFTA, and the signing of the Convention of Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters are crucial steps towards enhancing regional integration.³¹

However, it is important to note that SAARC was not designed to serve as a comprehensive security framework for South Asia. Despite adopting the regional convention to combat terrorism three decades ago, no tangible progress has been made. When SAARC effectively addresses developmental and social issues, it has the potential to offer a human security shield to South Asia. Therefore, it is a clear case of setting the priorities right and chalk out a long-term roadmap where human security and traditional military security can complement each other. Being in different steps of the development ladder and having quite extreme asymmetry in the constituent states' size and capability, the path of SAARC remains difficult.³²

SAARC was born in a difficult time, both globally and regionally. Early signs of change in the then world order was becoming imminent by the time the effort to create a regional organisation in South Asia was put in motion. The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan disturbed the status quo in South Asia which had hitherto remained static after the Bangladesh liberation war. The US became interested in the region and sought for a foothold in Pakistan to support the Afghan Mujahideen from the east of the Durand Line. On the other hand, Pakistan was by then became quite close to China, which had, in turn, warmed up its relations with the US during the 1970s. As a result, a power triangle of sorts had emerged on India's western borders, and the bloc was primarily aimed at neutralising Russia, which was incidentally a close friend of India. This made India suspicious of the motive behind SAARC. At the same time, some strong social and political forces in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka were sceptical about SAARC as they

³¹Ansari, H. (2009). Changing Political Context in South Asia and Prospect of Security and Regional Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 3–8). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

³²Muni, S. D. (2009). India and Regional Peace and Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 109–120). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

perceived it would be a kind of 'India+6 grouping' keeping India's preponderance in mind. All these resulted in the decision to keep bilateral disputes outside the ambit of SAARC discussions, and emphasis was given on unanimous decision for larger regional issues. Later, observers had identified these two as the biggest impediments in the success of SAARC.

Since there is hardly any consensus on political matters, the grouping focused on social and economic interactions among the member states; but, it was difficult to build strong interdependence without resolving core political issues that had haunted the region time and again. While there were a lot of words spoken on regional harmony and identity, socio-cultural gaps among the members became wider with stricter border management. Often these differences were used to create national identities by 'othering' a neighbour, in most cases India, further widening the gaps among themselves. Therefore, a combination of influence of extra-regional powers, mutual distrust among members and inability to resolve the differences on core political issues, was, from the very beginning, in work which put more hurdles in front of SAARC than it had the strength to manage.

Due to so much mistrust among the members and regional power asymmetry, SAARC has been able to achieve very little in almost four decades of its existence now. Many of its programmes and action plans did not see daylight, and remained limited to discussions in seminars and academic debates. Apparently, SAARC has been able to establish a food bank; but there was hardly any role for it when Bangladesh, Pakistan or Nepal were afflicted with severe food crises in the aftermath of super cyclone, flood and earthquake respectively. Though the organisation is heavily dependent on summit meetings, it has failed to convene 11 such meetings till the 2014 Kathmandu Summit. In 2016, India refused to join the summit scheduled to be held in Islamabad, following a terror attack in Uri army camp, and others followed suit. Since then, eight years have passed but the deadlock could not be opened and no summit meeting was held.

When most regional organisations with similar objectives have graduated to monetary unions or have been able to establish visa-free regimes, SAARC is yet to get SAFTA going in true sense; and, getting visa of a neighbouring SAARC country is sometimes far more difficult than getting one of the far-flung states across the globe. There are multiple projects of transnational nature in discussion for decades, like that of TAPI pipeline or free trans-border movement of goods in the region, which could benefit all, but politics had stood tall and nothing could be achieved despite enormous potential. The economies of South Asian states are almost fully dependent on imported energy, and a steady supply line would be a game changer for them; but, Pakistan's lack of will to come on board and recent developments in Afghanistan have choked the prospects of oil or gas pipelines from West Asia. Same has happened to regional connectivity initiatives. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, SAARC took the initiative to establish a Covid-19 Emergency Fund, which was brought together through voluntary contributions from all SAARC members. The initiative was spearheaded by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with members collectively pledging a significant sum of USD 21.6 million. Nevertheless, the SAARC secretariat, which is supposed to have the responsibility of coordinating and overseeing that fund, was unaware of any advancements regarding it.³³ Such is the condition of SAARC now!

5.4.3 India in SAARC

India reluctantly became a member of SAARC due to concerns that this regional grouping may not effectively serve India's regional interests and global aspirations. During that time neighbours were perceived as challenging entities embroiled in their own domestic issues, and,

³³SAARC Covid-19 Emergency Fund: No Progress on the Ground. (2021, August 9). *Nepal Live Today*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.nepallivetoday.com/2021/08/09/saarc-covid-19-emergency-fund-no-progress-on-the-ground>

given a chance, not averse to undermining India's interests; at the same time, lacking the capacity to offer any significant economic or other benefits to India. New Delhi also used to think that these states posed a significant risk to India's security, as they had the capability, and in some cases willingness, to cause harm either independently or under the influence of any external power.

India, known for its cautious approach and preference for bilateral diplomacy, needed reassurance about its concerns regarding the true intentions of the organisation. One of these concerns was the fear that the smaller states might join hands and challenge India's dominance in the region; and another was internationalisation of the bilateral disputes it had with these neighbours. To address these concerns, two important provisions were added to the SAARC charter. First, it was decided that all decisions would require unanimous agreement. Second, it was agreed that any bilateral or contentious issues would not be included in the SAARC agenda. Interestingly, these two particular clauses later came out to be significant challenges for SAARC and India in making substantial progress in economic and physical connectivity, as well as for other potential areas of cooperation.³⁴

The prevalent negative perception about the neighbourhood started changing after the end of the Cold War, when market forces made it imperative to connect comprehensively with one another. This became even more essential with the turn of the century, from when India had started aspiring to assume a more proactive and leadership role in global politics. Over the past couple of decades, India has increasingly recognised the importance of fostering positive relationships with its neighbours. A significant step was taken in this direction with the implementation of the 'Gujral Doctrine' in 1997. The then Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral made a commitment that India would not seek reciprocity from its neighbours and was willing

³⁴Gambhir, M. (2020, April). Evolution of Regional and Subregional Cooperation in South Asia. *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.claws.in/evolution-of-regional-and-sub-regional-cooperation-in-south-asia/>

to walk more than halfway to address their valid concerns and interests. The succeeding governments of Atal Behari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh have generally adhered to this principle; although they have not always explicitly acknowledged and recognised this ‘doctrine’ as such. The fundamental premise of the ‘Gujral Doctrine’ was that India aimed to accommodate its neighbouring countries in its growth trajectory, and in response, they would reciprocate by considering India's national interests in order to achieve mutual understanding.³⁵

In more recent times, this position in India’s neighbourhood policy has solidified to a great extent when the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown interest in taking the smaller neighbours along under his ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy; exemplified by his proposal for a free movement regime in South Asia. As usual, Pakistan emerged as the stumbling block in this broader vision of a connected neighbourhood with a densely interlinked transportation network that had possessed the capability to grow trade manifolds. The fate of SAARC had seen a couple of years’ sunshine, only again to be covered by clouds of uncertainty and chaos since the middle of the last decade.

India's dominant position in the South Asian power dynamics, owing to its strategic location, large size, and advanced economy, is a reality that both India and its neighbouring countries have no choice but to admit. India's geographical position has also thrust it into the focus, as it shares borders with all the SAARC countries, while no other two SAARC states have a land border between them. Afghanistan and Pakistan stand out as a case of exception as the two share borders; but how far Afghanistan should be treated as a part of SAARC or South Asia, when perceived in its original form, especially after the Taliban takeover in 2021, is a question to ponder upon. In any case, this does not change the geographical leverage of India, and also poses significant challenges in cross-border movement of goods and people across the region.

³⁵Muni, S. D. (2009). India and Regional Peace and Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 109–120). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

The smaller neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh have been affected by such India-centrism of SAARC for long, as their borders are only a few kilometres apart, but in between remains India. Trade, border crossings, energy agreements, and for that matter, any initiative is not possible without the cooperation of both interested sides, as well as India. Thus, India is often perceived by its neighbours as both the problem and the solution. India's consistent balance of trade surpluses with her neighbours in SAARC has led to a growing perception among these countries that any further attempts at trade liberalisation (like a fully operational SAFTA) will only serve to widen this gap. There is not only growing resentment due to trade deficits with India, but also fear of Indian merchandise chipping away their share in the global market. All these have made them apprehensive about a borderless South Asia where they see the possibility of Indian goods and services flooding their markets, giving further blow to the already struggling economies.³⁶

Therefore, it can be said without dispute that India has a greater role to play than its neighbours in promoting peace and security by virtue of cooperation in the region. Given its strategic location and abundance of both material and human resources, it is necessary for India to fulfil its responsibilities too, for the sake of a friendly neighbourhood. There are primarily five areas in which India can work to attain this goal of regional cooperation under SAARC, and these are— building of regional confidence, consolidation and harmonisation of collective economic stakes, strengthening of democratic and liberal political forces, redefining and restructuring of the security architecture of the region, and preservation of its strategic identity. Had India been able to achieve these goals, it would surely enhance its global reputation as the regional leader and an aspiring world power. To materialise this, as it seems, an effective SAARC would

³⁶Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

perhaps be the most viable vehicle, if not exclusively, then in conjunction with other mechanisms of complementary character.

In SAARC, India has quite the leverage that a regional power can expect in such a platform; and a functional SAARC would not only consolidate India's leadership role in South Asia, but also help in promoting cooperation in other associations of regional, sub-regional or trans-regional nature. Given the present circumstances, though it seems difficult, India should still strive to maintain a consistent approach of offering concessions when possible and seek to establish a harmonious relationship with neighbours within the SAARC platform. Pakistan remains a problem in this whole architecture; but to discard SAARC completely for that one reason does not look a wise choice either. India's current push with regard to the sub-regional associations, thus, as we have just pointed out in the previous paragraph, may be put in a complementary framework instead of exclusive of SAARC.³⁷³⁸

5.4.4 SAARC at Present

Following the terrorist attack in Uri in 2016, the Indian government expressed its diplomatic commitment to isolate states that back such terror organisations, regionally and globally; in an implied reference to Pakistan. The SAARC Summit of 2016 had to be cancelled in this backdrop, and since then none could be arranged. Prime Minister Modi extended invitations to the leaders of BIMSTEC for the BRICS Summit in Goa in 2016, highlighting India's new approach to regionalism. The ruling right of the centre Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shared its vision with regard to the neighbourhood in its election manifesto of 2019 which had endorsed

³⁷Muni, S. D. (2009). India and Regional Peace and Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 109–120). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

³⁸Gambhir, M. (2020, April). Evolution of Regional and Subregional Cooperation in South Asia. *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.claws.in/evolution-of-regional-and-sub-regional-cooperation-in-south-asia/>

organisations like BIMSTEC as the pivot in India's Neighbourhood First policy. In the 2024 manifesto, again the ruling party stressed on SAGAR maritime partnership project or the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor), clearly hinting at its global aspirations, instead of spending energy on the immediate neighbourhood in conventional terms. This marks a clear departure from India's decades-old approach with regard to its neighbours.

During his first swearing in ceremony, Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent invitations to all SAARC leaders. However, in 2019, inaugurating his second term, he chose to invite BIMSTEC leaders, indicating the shift. In fact, the concept of neighbour has undergone a major change in the last decade, with successive re-election of the BJP in India, and Pakistani state machinery's ever-diminishing control over its own territory and people. New Delhi has consciously chosen an approach which leaves the western border out of its regional vision, and as a result the future of SAARC, at least at present, does not look good. Smaller nations like Sri Lanka and Nepal had expressed their desire to hold a summit and get the regional cooperation back on track, but New Delhi's open preference to other regional and sub-regional mechanisms over SAARC has stalled any such progress. Moreover, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 has made the situation further complex. Afghanistan, during the decades of fragile democratic regimes, became a member of SAARC in 2007. Whether to continue its membership or if it is possible to hold a SAARC Summit inviting a top Taliban leader to it, are questions that no one knows the answer of.³⁹

The formation of organisations like the BIMSTEC is totally based on perceived mutual economic benefits. Taking emerging economies like Thailand and Myanmar in its fold, and excluding crisis-ridden Afghanistan and Pakistan out, definitely provides the grouping a good starting point. But can BIMSTEC or any such organisation of sub-regional character become a

³⁹Poudel, S. S. (2022, September). SAARC is Dead. Long Live Subregional Cooperation. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/saarc-is-dead-long-live-sub-regional-co-operation/>

substitute of SAARC? The probability is not on the higher side. Regional groupings have hardly ever been successful without a shared identity. True, this identity factor is the cause of a lot of political conflicts in a region like South Asia; nonetheless, it is an essential binding factor as well. A sub-regional group evolving out of economic intent is something different and quite limited in scope than a regional organisation with an aim of full-fledged integration. That's the real difference between SAARC and BIMSTEC.

In 2010, Nepal proposed China's membership to SAARC, by upgrading its observer status. Some smaller member-states see China's inclusion as the remedy for a working SAARC as that would shift the focus from ever-going rivalry between India and Pakistan. Beijing's economic muscle can push the economies of South Asia into the path of growth, bypassing the existing political conflicts, they argue. New Delhi vetoed the Nepali proposal though, as this meant Beijing's direct multilateral engagement in its neighbourhood which the former saw as an encroachment in its leverage in the regional platform.⁴⁰

To summarise, one can cite many factors behind the frozen state of SAARC, but the primary reasons probably are— lack of political will among (some of) the members, territorial disputes, use of proxies against neighbours to attain political goals, perceived hegemony of India, and intervention of major global powers. Though the organisation is currently in coma and there is little to no effort being seen to revive it; one should not forget that SAARC has undoubtedly achieved a few goals. For example, the SAFTA; a trade liberalisation agreement, even on paper, in a region like South Asia is absolutely commendable. It has not been able to live up to the expectations, still it's a milestone nonetheless. With very limited resources and in a period of transition across the region, SAARC has been able to establish South Asian University, South Asian Development Bank or the regional food bank, which clearly indicate the potential

⁴⁰Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

it has as a regional forum. Often the organisation has played the role of a facilitator, and provided a platform for bilateral dialogues between leaders of quarrelling states. SAARC's list of failures is definitely longer than that of success, but it is the only initiative that brought about some hope in establishing a South Asian identity among the states of this region.

5.5 Conclusion

SAARC has fallen far short of its mandate, and has mostly remained a disappointment for India. A lack of shared vision of India and her neighbours about the outside world is the primary cause of this. During the post-independence period, especially in the 1950s, India had perceived a role of leadership for itself; not politically or economically, but a moral leader of the newly independent states of the global south. Under Nehru's influence, Indian foreign policy was largely guided by idealism, and efforts were seen to erect an Asian solidarity or a global platform for the states remaining out of the superpower clientele in NAM, etc. India was a poor state then, lacking in both capital and technology required for modernising its state while continuing the nation building exercise; nevertheless, it had some industrial hubs, a professional military, large human resource, basic educational infrastructure and a working healthcare system, governed by an administration elected by the common people. Its neighbours, other than Sri Lanka to some extent, lacked all. Naturally, it was difficult for those states to become a partner in India's engagement at the world stage. With very limited and mostly primitive resources, these states were facing monumental internal strife which could lead them to fall apart anytime. In such a situation, their priority remained the survival of their states more than anything else. Moreover, India's humiliation in the 1962 border war with China had made these states question the capability of New Delhi to protect itself, let alone its neighbours. Therefore, like the European integration process started over the devastation of

World War II, based on common identity and shared interests, nothing such happened in South Asia, as it neither could create an overarching regional identity nor the states' interests converged. This remains true, to a major extent, even now. SAARC as a regional organisation has been, thus, like a bird with its wings clipped.

With the intensifying of the superpowers' competitive engagement around the world with escalation of the Cold War during the 1960s and 1970s, a general cooperation framework in South Asia looked more elusive. While officially remaining a member of the NAM, most of the states had to take sides, including India. In addition to that, except for India and Bhutan, other states were going through frequent political and social disorder often leading to dramatic transition at the top level; democracy being the victim most of the times. Such an uncertain environment made the states more inward-looking, leaving the world affairs to their superpower patrons. Despite the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the heat of international politics of the previous two decades started cooling down somewhat from the 1980s. This was the time when SAARC came into being. By that time, the European Community had established a successful model for regional cooperation, and a host of other regions were in the process of making one such. In such a context, SAARC was welcomed with optimism, especially by the smaller South Asian nations, as they found a platform to raise their concerns for the first time.

The timing and the backdrop were in favour of a working SAARC; though there were some initial hesitation from India and Pakistan, nonetheless the platform started out on a positive note. The process of globalisation, accompanied by liberalisation of national economies, from the early 1990s brought both opportunities and challenges. Integration of the economies of the region was a prerequisite for successfully taking the benefits of globalisation. The states of South Asia embarked on a journey of significantly higher trade among themselves, both in terms of volume and value. As different states were on the different steps of economic

modernisation, more advanced states like India accrued more gains from the process, widening the trade deficit between it and its neighbours. This made the neighbours soon apprehensive about such an integration process. As a result, though SAPTA came into effect in 1995, real integration of the economies under SAARC remained a distant dream. India's rapid growth with passing of years made the smaller neighbours appear feeble in front of it, dampening the initial euphoria about a regional economy and an open market. A decade later, SAFTA's progress was marred by the same problem, i.e. difference in growth rates and continuously widening trade gap with India. The opportunity had given its way to challenges, and in the process, regional political cooperation under SAARC backed by a solid economic union of sorts could not be realised. What the EU or the ASEAN could achieve, SAARC could not due to extremely asymmetrical distribution of wealth and power, further fuelled by globalisation.

Growing influence of extra-regional powers like China is another reason for SAARC's sluggish advancement. The smaller neighbours often try to play China when dealing with India; and, on the other hand, India remains sceptical about any Chinese investment in the neighbouring states. India could have played a more proactive role in promoting the idea of a regional security framework, being the net security provider to every state of the region except Pakistan; but the political climate never offered such a condition. SAARC does not have a mandate to deliberate bilateral disputes or internal matters of a member and all decisions are taken on consensus. These two restrictions have made the organisation weak and it could not react to situations where it was necessary, like the civil war of Sri Lanka or Nepal, democratic deficit in Pakistan or Maldives, environmental degradation in the name of industrialisation in India, etc. In a consistent effort to side-step every contentious political issue, over time it has lost its relevance. A regional organisation sending a satellite (though it was sent by India actually) to outer space but failing to discuss border management at multilateral meetings was bound to lose its way.

Apart from the lack of a collective vision for a common future, there is the identity factor which is also working against the association. Of late, as it looks, the identity of every neighbour has become somewhat contingent upon India, by the way of 'othering' it, as has been seen in Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives in recent times. Therefore, SAARC as an institution is composed of such states which lack shared economic interests, are politically volatile, and most importantly, the regimes in the neighbouring capitals quite often draw legitimacy by opposing India. None of them are in a position to totally decouple themselves from India; but neither they hesitate to play an assertive China to squeeze more concessions from the latter nor they stop mobilising public support on the back of anti-India sentiment. Meanwhile, India has been in the process of reimagining and restructuring its neighbourhood as such, putting its energy more and more east-ward, eyeing the ASEAN states where convergence of political interests and cultural affinity are present, with the BIMSTEC or the MGC as vehicles. In case of connectivity as well, New Delhi is investing heavily in Myanmar and Bangladesh, gateways to the east, taking Nepal and Bhutan along by the platform of BBIN. In such a backdrop, SAARC, which is fraught with both political and economic divisions and handcuffed by its charter, seems to have very little chance of being revitalised in near future, at least on India's behest.

Chapter 6

India in Sub-Regional Organisations: BIMSTEC, MGC, and IORA

6.1 Introduction

India's position as a regional power is somewhat unique, in the sense that it enjoys undisputed pre-eminence over all its neighbours, but does not enjoy their unconditional support in erecting a regional set up for peaceful cooperation. There are reasons for it, but as a result, the regional grouping SAARC, which is conventional in nature, did not work; neither for India, nor for its neighbours. As we have seen in the previous chapter, accepting SAARC's limitations, the need to cooperate as a region, at least on the economic front, does not go away. In such a context, India had been instrumental in creating other platforms of sub-regional character to bind the neighbours together; encouraging them to become part of such groupings as per their need and geographic location. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, as sub-regional architectures, should be seen in that light.

By the middle of the 1990s, New Delhi is seemed to become convinced about the futility of trying to meaningfully engage with Islamabad in regional settings. Moreover, the consecutive nuclear tests by India and Pakistan (in 1998), the Kargil War (in 1999), hijacking of the Indian Airlines' passenger aircraft to Afghanistan (in 1999) etc. provided further impetus to that policy shift in principle. In 1996, the first such alternative mechanism was launched in the shape of the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), highlighting India's commitment towards the Look East Policy. Therefore, the composition and timing of inception of the BIMSTEC (1997), the IORA (1997) and the MGC (2000) is not surprising; rather revealing as to what India's future neighbourhood policy might look like.

The Chinese ‘new security concept’ (NSC) coupled with the doctrine of ‘China’s Peaceful Rise’ in the post-Cold War era with a “go out, go global” slogan was pointing to its possible orientation in foreign policy in the coming times, already marked by assertions with regard to Taiwan and the South China Sea. Just four years later, in 2001, the US came to the South Asian theatre again, to fight the ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan, following the incidents of 9/11. This changing security environment coincided with India’s rapid economic growth, as the fruits of the liberalisation process were starting to translate into real upliftment of the Indian masses. In all, New Delhi was facing a formidable challenge of keeping the economic growth going while not compromising on its security in the regional space; in a South Asia which was then fraught with several internal strife inside the member-states as well. Novel techniques and new instruments were the need of the time; and these sub-regional platforms of different nature came into existence out of that need.

6.2 The BIMSTEC

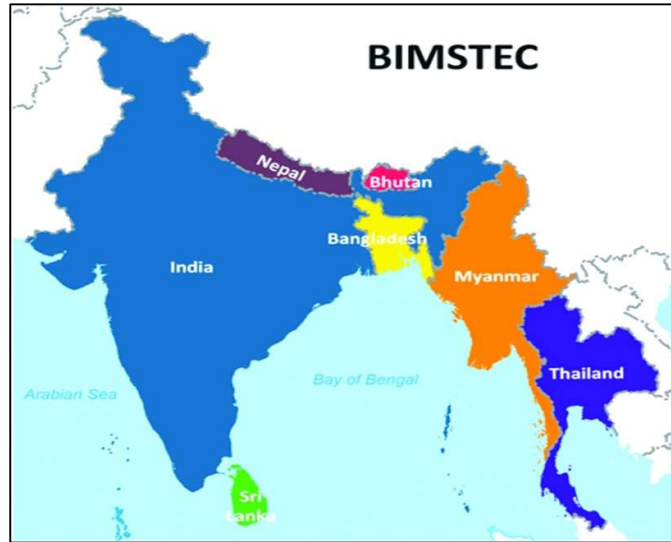
The BIMSTEC is technically a sub-regional organisation overlapping two regions of Asia, and consisting of seven member-states; five of them are located in the littoral areas, while two others are landlocked but dependent on the Bay of Bengal, forming a continuous geographic area. The organisation was established on 6th June, 1997 with the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration. Interestingly, five members of this bloc are from South Asia, which include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, who are also founding members of the SAARC. The remaining two countries, Myanmar and Thailand, are from Southeast Asia, and are members of the ASEAN grouping. At first, the bloc was conceptualised as an economic bloc and was established with four countries along the Bay of Bengal, and was named as the 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation).

With the inclusion of Myanmar in December, 1997, during a ministerial meeting, a change in name was required and it was renamed as the 'BIMST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). In the 6th ministerial meeting held in February, 2004 in Bangkok, Nepal and Bhutan were incorporated into the grouping. This changed the nature of the bloc as these two were mountainous, landlocked nations connected to the Bay of Bengal via India for international trade and communication, and it also extended its mandate. As a result, the name was redrawn as the 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation' (BIMSTEC). Six key areas were identified for cooperation which seemed to be mutually beneficial for all; these included—fisheries, trade and investment, technology, energy, transport and communication, and tourism. The first Summit Meeting of the BIMSTEC was held in 2004, and it was quite successful by signing the Framework Agreement for BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, the launch of a year-long tourism promotion plan under the name 'Visit BIMSTEC', and establishment of its office in Bangkok.¹

The primary motive of the BIMSTEC was to create a Free Trade Area for the purpose of trade liberalisation among the members which had enough complementarity to grow together. The Framework Agreement for the BIMSTEC FTA has already been ratified by the signatories, which shows a positive approach of the members about the grouping. The member-states are yet to finalise the finer details on the FTA, though they are actively engaged in negotiations through the BIMSTEC Trade Negotiation Committee (TNC) in rounds of discussions.²

¹*Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)*. (n.d.). Asia Regional Integration Centre. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/bay-of-bengal-initiative-for-multi-sectoral-technical-and-economic-cooperation>

²*BAY OF BENGAL INITIATIVE FOR MULTI-SECTORAL TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION (BIMSTEC)*. (2016). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.mofa.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Revised-BIMSTEC-Brief.pdf>



*Figure 17: the BIMSTEC on map.
Source: The Pioneer, dated 08.10.2021*

6.2.1 Evolution of BIMSTEC and Its Prospects

The BIMSTEC has undergone a gradual process of institutional evolution. In 2014, the BIMSTEC Secretariat was established in Dhaka, following a decision made at the Third BIMSTEC Summit. This was a much-needed move to provide an institutional framework for day to day running of its works. As we have seen, BIMSTEC initially focused on six sectors as key areas of cooperation in 1997, but over time, the members felt the need to expand it; and in 2008, inducted additional sectors such as agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people-to-people contact, and climate change in its mandate. Special emphasis was given on people to people contact by way of reopening old cultural routes that went broken during the colonial rule. After rationalising and reorganising these key areas in seven sectors and various related sub-sectors, the mechanism for cooperation

was restructured in 2021 again. Each member is now designated as the lead country of a particular sector and allied sub-sectors for better and efficient functioning.³

The BIMSTEC is structured into five tiers:

- The Summit consists of the heads of state or government of the member states.
- The Ministerial Meeting consists of the ministers responsible for foreign relations from the members.
- The Sectoral Ministerial Meetings consist of the ministers of line ministries who are responsible for implementing the activities of their respective sectors.
- The Senior Officials' Meeting is comprised of the foreign secretaries, secretaries, and other senior officials who have been nominated by the members.
- The BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPCW) is made up of senior officials from the National Focal Points.⁴

Historical studies have suggested that the Bay of Bengal region was one of the most connected regions around the globe, even until the early 20th century. Independence from their respective colonial rulers during the middle of the century in the backdrop of the Cold War, and new emerging routes of international trade and commerce along the Indo-Pacific caused distance among these states. Therefore, this is more like rekindling the old relations rather than establishing new ones. Not only history, its sector-driven cooperation mechanism also makes the BIMSTEC unique. Assigning one sector to each member state guarantees some amount of accountability too. Other than the occasional summits and more frequent but irregular ministerial meetings, the bloc was lacking in a formal organisational structure; the issue which was addressed in the latest summit that adopted a BIMSTEC Charter. It may be pertinent to

³*History – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)*. (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/bimstec-history/>

⁴*Mechanism – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)*. (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/bimstec-mechanism-3/>

note here that though summits were supposed to be held every alternate year, it has been convened only five times in 25 years. Ministerial meetings were held 18 times in these years, although it was expected to be an annual affair. More interestingly, the Senior Officials Meet which was slated to be held twice a year, has been postponed seven times from 2014 to 2017. As a result, the pace with which the bloc is progressing can be at best termed as sluggish.

Even after the establishment of a headquarters and appointment of a Secretary General in 2011 and 2014 respectively, the organisation suffers from inadequate manpower and resources. In fact, India's trade volume with BIMSTEC countries as a percentage of its total foreign trade has come down to just 4% in 2020 from a double-digit figure in the 1950s. There is enormous possibility of trade among the members which remain untapped due to lack of a harmonised plan of action, and proper implementation of the existing plans. For example, the fishermen population stands at about 3.7 million approximately in the Bay of Bengal region, with an annual catch of 6 million tonnes, valuing USD 4 billion, and accounting for about 7% of total catch worldwide. Still there is almost no coordination and synchronisation of policies and joint efforts to get this industry fully commercialised based on modern technologies and logistics; on the contrary, the members frequently accuse each other of unlawful detention of their fishermen with allegations of crossing maritime borders.⁵

6.2.2 India in the BIMSTEC

The BIMSTEC region is a thriving part of the world map with a whopping 1.8 billion population, accounting for 22% of world's total, and with a USD 3.6 trillion economy.⁶ India

⁵Munjal, D. (2022, April 6). Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant? *The Hindu*. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>

⁶*Agriculture and Food Security – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)*. (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/agriculture-and-food-security->

considers the BIMSTEC as its gateway to Southeast Asia, more precisely the ASEAN markets, which is in line with its Look/ Act East Policy. It can also be viewed as part of India's broader objective to widen trade and security influence in the Indian Ocean region, while giving a boost to the concept of the Indo-Pacific, which is a key focus for Quad countries. India's intention to strengthen its position as a leader in the Bay, and its efforts in the recent past to maintain peace and security have been largely influenced by China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region. China is currently engaged in an extensive effort to develop infrastructure in various South and Southeast Asian states under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With limited resources, India had to respond to such assertion; and though BIMSTEC was launched with a different objective long before the BRI came, considering complementarity in economies and age-old cultural linkages with the member-states, the grouping was chosen to be New Delhi's vehicle to counter the Chinese influence in the Bay of Bengal.

The idea of an active and goal-oriented BIMSTEC had gained further traction on the ground following the 2016 Uri attack, just three years after the launch of the BRI in 2013, when India successfully rallied SAARC states to boycott the summit scheduled to take place in Islamabad. The progress of SAARC has been hindered for decades due to the strained relations between India and Pakistan, and more for Pakistan's obstructionist approach to the organisation. In such a context, the BIMSTEC has emerged as an alternative platform for regional cooperation. Not only for India, the bloc has something or the other to gain for everyone; and all members accept that. Being a focused and sector-driven grouping, BIMSTEC offers Bangladesh a platform to solidify its growth trajectory, while for Sri Lanka it could be a vehicle for transforming itself into a shipping hub on the Indian Ocean, for Myanmar and Thailand this bloc offers an emergency alternative to ASEAN and also reduces dependence on China. Similarly, for land-

[2/#:~:text=BIMSTEC%20region%20is%20home%20to,common%20people's%20principal%20employment%20source.](#)

locked states like Nepal and Bhutan, this is a gateway to the high seas and the markets of East and Southeast Asia.⁷

Pakistan's decision to not participate in the South Asian MVA (Motor Vehicle Agreement) or the regional satellite plan in the 2014 SAARC Summit, and their continued support for terrorists and proxies in India put New Delhi's efforts to reshape its neighbourhood policy in the fast lane. In comparison to such a paralysed SAARC, Look/ Act East Policy's success was impressive as under this framework India had been able to connect its north-eastern provinces to the regional industrial and trade grids to a major extent, and it had been able to do so by virtue of revitalised and strengthened ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar. As a result, the Indian government under Narendra Modi repositioned its neighbourhood policy to prioritise BIMSTEC over SAARC.

In 2016, Prime Minister Modi made a significant move by excluding SAARC and instead inviting BIMSTEC leaders for the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit, on the parallels of the BRICS Summit, in Goa. The concept of establishing and promoting the BIMSTEC was in tune with India's efforts to enhance regional cooperation and prevent it from being hostage to the India-Pakistan hostility. It also aimed to neutralise Pakistan's ambition to forge a coalition against India at the regional level, with tacit support from China. The idea of BIMSTEC is perfectly situated at the confluence of two pillars of India's current foreign policy edifice, namely the Look/ Act East Policy and the Neighbourhood First Policy, under the broader framework of Indo-Pacific Vision. In a show of commitment, Prime Minister Modi has pledged to provide USD 1 million to support the operational expenses of the BIMSTEC Secretariat,

⁷Munjal, D. (2022, April 6). Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant? *The Hindu*. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>

during the 2018 summit. In fact, the Secretariat in Dhaka is largely a result of India's push for a formal structure for the BIMSTEC.⁸

It is important to note that India's proactive stand on the BIMSTEC after 2016 should not be seen as a mere reaction to the issues with Pakistan in SAARC, or as a deliberate attempt to counter China. We have already noted that the emphasis on the BIMSTEC aligns with India's overall neighbourhood policy, which was the driving force behind its establishment in 1997. In 2016, there came a noticeable shift in the pace rather than a significant change in the direction. The BIMSTEC brings together India's strategic peripheries under one single umbrella, in contrast to SAARC where focus is primarily on the subcontinental countries. This platform also provides for a more streamlined approach to India's regional integration by side-stepping Indo-Pak tensions, and in the process puts forward a counter narrative to politically motivated Chinese investments in the neighbourhood.

Moreover, there is a renewed thrust on the development of India's north-eastern provinces in recent times and a successful sub-regional platform like the BIMSTEC can do wonders for these parts of India. Surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, these eight north-eastern states (Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh) are land-locked and consists of 7.9 % of Indian land with only 3.8% population. Despite being rich in natural resources, these states economically lag quite behind the other western and southern Indian states. For example, in the 2022-23 financial year, Maharashtra, the most industrially developed province in India contributed about 13% of India's GDP, whereas these eight provinces could contribute only about 3% together. Even the

⁸Mishra, R. (2022, April 12). *India's Pivotal Role in the BIMSTEC*. Universiti Malaya. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://aei.um.edu.my/india-s-pivotal-role-in-the-bimstec>

growth rate of this region stands below the national average, at around 2-4% annually.⁹¹⁰ Therefore, it is necessary to connect these small, mostly non-industrialised economies to other hubs of industrial production and trading centres. Incidentally it is much easier for them to do business with Southeast Asian states, having an opportunity, than with the southern or the western parts of India. Under such a context, the BIMSTEC can become an important vehicle in that respect too.¹¹

India has been actively pursuing various regional connectivity initiatives in the east through various platforms since the end of the 1990s, including the BIMSTEC. But this wide array of Indian approaches presents a challenge for the BIMSTEC too; as it navigates alongside and contends with other tracks, including the long-established bilateral ones. For instance, India is currently focusing on establishing protocols for inland waterway navigation and motor vehicle agreement at multiple levels. These include bilateral arrangements, other sub-regional initiatives like the BBIN or the IMTT Highway, and also through the BIMSTEC. Such diplomatic multi-tasking is neither novel, nor unethical; but New Delhi needs to tread the path cautiously so that no initiative at any level becomes counter-effective for the other.¹²

6.3 The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation programme is a collaborative effort by India and the five Mekong River lower riparian states of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

⁹About District Strategic Plan. (n.d.). Maharashtra State Development Board. Retrieved July 18, 2024, from <https://mahasdb.maharashtra.gov.in/DSP/aboutProgram>

¹⁰Fruman, C. (2024, March 16). In northeast India, all roads lead to greater development. *World Bank Blogs*. Retrieved July 18, 2024, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/northeast-india-all-roads-lead-greater-development>

¹¹Sharma, A., & Rathore, C. (2015). BIMSTEC and BCIM Initiatives and Their Importance for India. In *CUTS International*. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://www.cuts-citee.org/pdf/BIMSTEC_and_BCIM_Initiatives_and_their_Importance_for_India.pdf

¹²Xavier, C. (2021, January). *Connect East: Explaining India's BIMSTEC Focus*. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <http://20.244.136.131/expert-speak/connect-east-explaining-indias-bimstec-focus>

During the First Ministerial Meeting, held from November 9th to 13th, 2000, the MGC was formally launched in Laos' capital, Vientiane; and, initially it was named as the 'Ganga Suvarnabhumi Programme' (GMSP). This arose as a result of India's various interactions and involvement with the 'Greater Mekong Sub-region' (GMS), and it aimed to focus on fostering collaboration among India and the five GMS countries in the areas of tourism, arts and culture, educational exchanges, transportation, and communications. The six foreign ministers of these nations decided to launch this project during a conference in Bangkok, Thailand, in July 2000, which was held as a precursor to the 33rd ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference. The lower Mekong region is extremely significant to India, both historically and strategically. The MGC is unique in the sense that it is the oldest sub-regional cooperation mechanism based on the strong historical, geographical, and cultural linkages in this part of the world.

The specific goal of this platform is to showcase India's natural connectedness through similar cultural and civilisational traits. Thus, from an operational aspect, the initiative aims to increase collaboration in the fields of culture, science and technology, human resource management, and transportation and infrastructure. Against this backdrop, it needs to be remembered that the five Mekong riparian states had already begun to collaborate on these shared challenges. They had already ideated on similar concepts and launched an initiative of the same nature called the 'Suwanna Phum', the traditional Indochina word for 'Swarnabhoomi'. In order to boost cultural tourism, the benefits of physical closeness, shared heritage, and Buddhist relationships were utilised to start their journey in that direction, through cooperation and resource sharing. India kind of joined in to that mechanism, providing it with further impetus. The then Thai leaders played a significant role in conceptualising the initiative and engaging India in it.

The 2nd MGC Ministerial Meeting took place in Hanoi on 28th July 2001. During the meeting, the participants approved the Hanoi Programme of Action (HPA), which outlined a

comprehensive Work Programme for a six-year period from July 2001 to July 2007. The HPA provided for specific actions for cooperation in the four traditional areas. The 3rd MGC Ministerial Meeting took place in Phnom Penh on 20th June 2003, further bolstering the political drive behind the MGC initiative and the Phnom Penh Roadmap was adopted. During the ASEAN Summit in Cebu, the Philippines, Thailand passed on the chairmanship to India on 12th January 2007. The 5th MGC Ministerial Meeting took place in Manila, the Philippines on 1st August 2007, with India serving as the chair.

Subsequently, the MGC Ministerial Meetings got put on hold for a period of 5 years, spanning from 2007 to 2012. Several factors contributed to this halt; most notably political upheavals in Thailand, one of the most enthusiastic partners of the grouping. Meanwhile, an increasing interest was seen in India about the sub-region, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008-09. The development of an axis of sorts among Pakistan, China and India's old friend Russia prompted New Delhi to re-energise the existing cooperation mechanisms and create new ones around China; and the MGC was among the ones that got into limelight once again about this time. The 6th MGC Ministerial Meeting took place in New Delhi on 4th September 2012, following the MGC Senior Officials Meeting on the previous day. In this meeting, the forum decided to come out of the limits of four traditional areas, and indulge into more compelling issues of the time. The ministers acknowledged the progress made in the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project, though on a conceptual level at that point of time, and other collaborative efforts within the India-ASEAN framework to achieve India-ASEAN connectivity.¹³

¹³Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). (2017, March). *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_MGC_March_2017.pdf



Figure 18: the MGC countries on world map.
Source: nationsonline.org

At the 12th MGC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2023, leaders discussed ways to maintain the significance of this long-standing sub-regional cooperation framework between the Mekong countries and an external partner. They identified key areas for collaboration, such as tourism, culture, education, and connectivity; with the goal of nurturing socio-economic development among the MGC countries, reducing development disparity among the member-states, and contributing to the ASEAN community-building process. In order to enhance the efficiency of the MGC, leaders reviewed the lead country mechanism for each area of cooperation and suggested the establishment of a MGC Business Council. India's trade with MGC countries has shown consistent growth over the years, reaching USD 33.8 billion in 2022-23, from a meagre USD 1.32 billion in the 2000-01 financial year. However, there is still room for more regional economic integration between the Mekong countries and India.¹⁴

¹⁴Hussain, N. (2024). Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation. *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief*, No. 13, 1–3. <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/MKG%20PB-Feb%202024.pdf>

6.3.1 Importance of the Mekong River in Southeast Asia

Geographically speaking, the Mekong River rises on the Tibetan Plateau, where it is known as the Lancang, and flows through five riparian Southeast Asian states: Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, before joining the disputed South China Sea. This trans-boundary waterway, which spans around 4,500 KM, splits the area into two basins: the upper basin, which includes China and Myanmar, and the lower basin, which includes the other four Southeast Asian nations mentioned. A vital lifeline for about 300 million people, the Mekong River's distinct ecosystem is vital to the majority of the countries in its lower basin, whose economies and food security are inextricably linked to it. For example, the fishing industry in Cambodia alone contributes 7%-12% of the country's GDP, and its primary source of fish is the Mekong River, along with the biggest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, Tonle Sap, which is again fed by the Mekong. Similar to this, Vietnam's agricultural industry is centred on rice production and rice fields cover more than 80% of the country's arable land; and, it is mostly concentrated in the Mekong Delta, which is often referred to as the country's 'rice bowl'.¹⁵

A significant path of the Mekong River is located within Chinese territory. The unique geography of the region makes a significant drop in elevation of Mekong, descending over 4,000 metres from the Tibetan plateau to the plains of Yunnan province. As a result, the area provides an ideal environmental setting for harnessing hydroelectric power. Cashing in on the opportunity, in the last twenty years, the Chinese government has been involved in construction or funding of multiple large hydropower dams along the river, both within China and in the neighbouring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Building dams has both positive and negative consequences. Hydroelectricity presents a promising opportunity for revenue

¹⁵Brauer, R., & Kliem, F. (n.d.). Coercive Water-Diplomacy: Playing Politics with the Mekong. In *The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Based in Singapore*. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung based in Singapore. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c82d2f4e-6ef5-3bad-c444-38e7739f7637&groupId=252038

generation for the economically backward states of Indochina, and the governments seek to leverage its locational advantage along the river system. However, mounting evidence points to significant negative ecological and socio-economic impacts of the Mekong dams, which offsets their positives. These projects can disrupt wildlife, change natural flow patterns, and affect sediment delivery; as is already noticed in Tonle Sap. Moreover, shoreline erosion and increased salinisation of agricultural land have increasingly been subjected to the dam construction or unscientific management of the river.¹⁶ According to some estimates, China has 60 operational dams and reservoirs, 30 more being built, and another 90 being studied.¹⁷ Similarly, states in the lower riparian zones are also constructing dams, and between 2016 and 2020, a total of 14 dams with a combined capacity of 3,000 MW were reported to have become operational.¹⁸

The Mekong basin is another possible geopolitical hotspot in Southeast Asia, following the South China Sea. There is mutual suspicion among the actors with regard to administration of Mekong water. Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) states are not happy with China's unilateral initiatives on the upper basin of the river which practically hampers every aspect of their life on the lower side. Due to their different levels of engagement with China, which sometimes go to the extent of dependence as the case with Cambodia and Laos, these states are unable to put up a joint resistance to Beijing. A situation like this opens up the possibility of involvement of extra-regional powers, like the US or India. These outside powers have their own interests and strategic calculations with regard to Beijing, which is leveraged by the LMB states for their standing vis-à-vis China. Building on the success of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the US and its five Mekong partner countries have established the Mekong-U.S. Partnership as a

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Blessing or curse? (2019, April 3). *The ASEAN Post*.

<https://theaseanpost.com/article/lancang-mekong-cooperation-blessing-or-curse#:~:text=While%20China%20pulling%20out%20of,this%20great%20river%20for%20survival>

¹⁸*Hydropower*. (n.d.). Mekong River Commission (MRC). Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.mrcmekong.org/our-work/topics/hydropower/>

strategic platform for collaboration in 2020. The Mekong-U.S. Partnership is driven by shared values that are in line with the principles outlined in the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ and ‘the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision’.¹⁹ What is interesting to note here is that the Lower Mekong Initiative had started its journey only in 2009, nine years after the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, making India the front-runner with respect to such an engagement. Though the MGC is much benign in its stated objectives and modest in achievements so far, nonetheless, its significance is, thus, beyond question.

6.3.2 The US-China Strategic Competition in the LMB, and India

In the last couple of decades, the governments of Southeast Asia have taken interest in working together with the states outside their region, like the US, Japan, South Korea, India, etc., to explore security cooperation and economic engagement as a means of managing and hedging against China’s unchecked dominance. China's assertive neighbourhood policy posture in recent times and an ever-increasing presence in mainland Southeast Asia have significantly moved the LMB nations for the current level of engagement with these extra-regional powers. By engaging in economic interdependence, the smaller nations of Southeast Asia are actively seeking assurance on security, as it seems.²⁰

Despite their strong economic links, the riparian states and China disagree on a number of topics, primarily with regard to the trade deficit and border disputes. Vietnam and China are involved in a conflict across the South China Sea; and Ho Chi Minh City is particularly worried about Beijing's involvement and actions with the Mekong water in the backdrop of a military

¹⁹*Mekong-U.S. Partnership: Regional Development Mission for Asia*. (n.d.). U.S. Agency For International Development. Retrieved May 23, 2024, from <https://www.usaid.gov/asia-regional/lower-mekong-initiative-lmi>

²⁰Busbarat, P. (2020, August 31). Major powers react to rising Chinese influence in Mekong. *ThinkChina*. Retrieved December 26, 2023, from <https://www.thinkchina.sg/society/major-powers-react-rising-chinese-influence-mekong>

conflict with mainland China about Paracel island in 1974. Remaining cautious about Chinese intentions, it practises comprehensive diplomacy with other nations, especially the US. Conversely, China maintains tight ties with Laos and Cambodia and has made large investments in these states. Maintaining very warm relations with China with the expectation of economic incentives though; even Laos and Cambodia share the same kind of apprehension like others with regard to management of the Mekong. Former Cambodian President Hun Sen once opposed the construction of a dam in Laos, funded by the Chinese, only to retreat later apparently with a promise from Beijing on supply of low cost electricity to his country. Later reports claimed that his withdrawal actually came from a promise of a Chinese aid package and fear of sanctions in the course of a denial. Such diplomatic manoeuvres by Beijing in the Lower Mekong area are now quite common and some call it Chinese ‘coercive water diplomacy’.²¹

The Mekong sub-region has a number of institutional structures to facilitate collaboration at different levels. The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) was formed in Phuket, Thailand on July 23, 2009, with the goal of "enhancing collaboration in the areas of atmosphere, education, health, and infrastructure development" in the Mekong sub-region. It was primarily an agreement among the United States and four states sitting on the lower basin, in which Myanmar joined later, in 2012.²² By strengthening river management, LMI seeks to solve shared issues of these lower riparian states; and to that end, the Mississippi River Commission and the Mekong River Commission have joined forces in a ‘sister-river’ arrangement to collaborate on the governance of the river and its water management¹. Similarly, in the face of troubling trends, such as China's control over downstream flows, its extraterritorial river patrols undermining the Mekong River Commission, increasing transnational crimes, etc., the US

²¹Fawthrop, T. (2017, January 17). Cambodian backflip bolsters China on the Mekong. *The Interpreter*. Retrieved January 8, 2024, from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cambodian-backflip-bolsters-china-mekong>

²²Lower Mekong Initiative. (2019, February 21). United States Department of State. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/lower-mekong-initiative/>

reiterated its commitment "to help protect sovereignty and security, prosperity, and safeguard its rich cultures and environment," as stated during the 10th Anniversary of the LMI in 2019.²³

Seven years after the US-led LMI, China established the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016, to counter American influence in its borders. The platform was based on the idea of "shared river, shared future" and offered a sub-regional stage for regular interaction among the riparian states of the Mekong.²⁴ This practically replaced the apolitical and a treaty-based mechanism standing on the principles of equity, the Mekong River Commission, founded in 1995. Many observers view this initiative as a Chinese reaction to the visible resentment among the LMB nations. In an effort to show goodwill and strengthen the platform, the Chinese released water through the Jinghong dam prior to the first LMC Summit. Moreover, since its establishment, Beijing has shown some amount of sensibility about the lower riparian states' concerns. For example, during a drought-like situation in Vietnam in 2019, it released a good amount of water to tackle the immediate problems of rice harvesting. In dry seasons, on request from Cambodia, Beijing allowed water to flow to fill up the Tonle Sap Lake. But, if seen from a larger point of view, these measures or periodic goodwill gestures only reasserts the Chinese control over the river, and as a result, over the region.

In light of the strategic competition involving the US and China in Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Mekong sub-region, India offers Southeast Asian nations—particularly the riparian states of the Mekong—an alternate path to growth via peaceful, socio-economic collaboration. The common civilisational and cultural bonds have enabled India and these nations to reimagine their long-standing relationship in the 21st century which is marked by

²³Opening Remarks at the Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting. (2019, August 1) by M. Pompeo. *U.S. Embassy in Burma*. Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting, Myanmar.

<https://mm.usembassy.gov/opening-remarks-at-the-lower-mekong-initiative-ministerial/>

²⁴Xuanmin, L. (2022, July 19). Lancang-Mekong Cooperation built on mutual political trust, voluntary participation: Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar. *The Global Times*.

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270900.shtml>

mutual growth and prosperity, and by that keeping the Chinese influence under control. The cooperation mechanism was conceptualised during the late 1990s as a part of India's east-ward drive under the banner of the Look East Policy. Over time, with an ever-increasingly powerful and ambitious China taking interest in its neighbourhood compelled New Delhi to re-emphasise the significance of the mechanism since 2012. Under the Modi government, India's interest in the east has further shot up in the backdrop of a moribund SAARC. Moreover, India's close connections with the US, Australia, and Japan in recent times, built on shared interests in the Indo-Pacific, make this kind of association pivotal in having strong roots in areas where such connections can deliver geostrategic results.

6.3.3 India in the MGC

Developing diverse connections and achieving tangible outcomes is essential for the MGC's future, as external powers compete for influence using their own Mekong cooperation frameworks. India offers a distinct infrastructure development model and market access, having granted Mekong countries Lines of Credit totalling approximately USD 1.76 billion for different initiatives in various sectors. New Delhi has implemented a people-centric and results-oriented approach in the Mekong sub-region through the Quick Impact Projects (QIP) scheme. This initiative has directly improved the physical infrastructure and addressed social issues such as sanitation, water resource management, elementary education, and women empowerment, benefiting the local population. Since their inception in 2015-16, as of early 2024, a total of 105 QIPs have been sanctioned, out of which 78 projects are now successfully completed, and 27 are currently in the implementation phase.²⁵

²⁵Hussain, N. (2024). Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation. *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief, No. 13*, 1–3. <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/MKG%20PB-Feb%202024.pdf>

India offers around 1000 scholarships to the MGC countries under the ITEC Programme, for studies in technical institutes. Besides, ICCR offers some more in non-technical areas such as culture, tourism, teachers' training, film and allied industries, or theatre. Additionally, capacity building initiatives in sectors of law, public policy and administration, ICT, e-governance, etc. are also continuing for a long time. Banking on the shared Buddhist heritage, India invited leaders, religious scholars, and monks for the 5th International Buddhist Conclave which was held between 2nd-5th October 2016 in Delhi, Varanasi, and Sarnath, as guests of honour.²⁶ In the most recent Ministerial Meeting, held in Bangkok on 16th July 2023, co-chaired by Indian Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, emphasis was laid on connectivity and the IMT Trilateral Highway was the onus of discussions on such connectivity. All members showed interest in completing the existing project and stretching it further to Vietnam to enable seamless movement of cargo and people. A proposal on MGC Business Council has also been adopted and special focus was given to the MSME sector.²⁷ The following day, Jaishankar attended the BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers' Retreat, hosted by Thailand. This clearly shows how India wants to play in the adjacent sub-regions of the BIMSTEC and the MGC. Though BIMSTEC is a more comprehensive partnership network than the MGC, there are early signs that the MGC could also change its character in the coming times.

In that direction, the commitment of the MGC countries to strengthen security ties with New Delhi has been bolstered by their individual geopolitical considerations. As a result, there is now a greater opportunity for engagement, leading to increased joint training and exercises in defence and security between India and Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia. India has recently

²⁶Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). (2017, March). *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_MGC_March_2017.pdf

²⁷*Outcomes of the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting*. (2023, July 16). [Press release]. PRESS RELEASE. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from https://mfaic.gov.kh/files/uploads/T2CEOJVCWVG/With_Letterhead_PR_ENG_Outcome%20of%2012th%20MGC%20FMM.pdf

transferred a fully operational missile corvette to the Vietnamese Navy, marking a first of its kind strategic move in the sub-region. In another significant development, India and Cambodia have recently signed agreements to enhance cooperation between their respective armies. This includes the establishment of direct communication channels between their military units, fostering closer ties and collaboration. As India's two main foreign policy initiatives, 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First', depend largely on developing stronger ties with the Mekong countries, New Delhi will continue to adopt a proactive approach to the Mekong sub-region, one can surely assume. The MGC could also explore potential collaborations with the 'ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity 2025' (MPAC), BIMSTEC Master Plan for Connectivity, and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). All these frameworks involve India and the Mekong states and can offer valuable opportunities for synergy. India maintains partnerships with ACMECS, it is a member state of the BIMSTEC, as well as a Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN; therefore, New Delhi is in a position to take lead in that direction.²⁸

6.4 The IORA

The concept of the Indian Ocean as a region with the potential for shared prosperity and security can be attributed to the IORA's founding members, India and South Africa. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was initially established as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IMRI) in March 1995, consisting of seven member-states. The organisation was subsequently renamed the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) in March 1997, with 14 members. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) currently has 23 members

²⁸Hussain, N. (2024). Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation. *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief, No. 13*, 1–3. <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/MKG%20PB-Feb%202024.pdf>

and 11 dialogue partners, and it includes almost all major powers; and this has contributed to its status as a highly engaged and influential multilateral sub-regional organisation.²⁹

With significant changes in East Asia's security and economic landscape followed by the conclusion of the Cold War, the Asia-Pacific region witnessed a gradual increase in regional multilateralism. As a result, it encouraged other areas- Indian Ocean's rim nations included- to make comparable efforts.³⁰ Nelson Mandela proposed in 1994 that nations along the Indian Ocean rim establish a single forum for socio-economic cooperation and other non-violent initiatives.³¹ During a 1995 visit to India, Mandela reiterated the idea of an Indian Ocean rim platform for such cooperation, and hoped that such a peaceful initiative should broaden itself as a natural effort out of the facts of history and geography.³² It now looks more relevant considering the recent changes in the international system, and an ever-increasing competitive engagement around the Indian Ocean.



Figure 19: IORA member states on world map.
Source: NewsIn Asia, dated 16.10.2023

²⁹Srivastava, R. (2024). Indian Ocean RIM Association Gaining Deeper Significance. *Indian Defence Review*, Net edition. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indian-ocean-rim-association-gaining-deeper-significance/>

³⁰Naidu, G. V. C. (2015). Prospects for IOR-ARC Regionalism: An Indian Perspective. In D. Rumley & T. Doyle (Eds.), *Indian Ocean Regionalism* (1st ed., p. 25). Routledge.

³¹Venter, D. (2001). The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-Operation (IOR-ARC): Reality or Imagery? *Africa Quarterly*, 41(3), 1–32.

³²Bose, S. (2006). *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (1st ed.). Harvard University Press.

IORA was founded on this philosophy of idealism coupled with pragmatic reasoning. The growth of economic collaboration among nations around the Indian Ocean Rim was the subject of a meeting called by the Mauritian government on March 29-31, 1995, which included the representatives from seven countries' governments, businesses, and academia. The inaugural Ministerial Meeting in Mauritius on March 6-7, 1997, served as the official launch-pad for the IOR-ARC (Indian Ocean Rim- Association for Regional Cooperation). At this meeting, the organisation's administrative and procedural framework, as well as the charter, were decided upon and adopted.³³

The 23 countries that make up IORA's (Indian Ocean Rim Association) current membership are Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.³⁴ Following in the footsteps of the ASEAN, eleven states, China, Egypt, Italy, Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US), and one regional organisation, the European Union, have established dialogue partnerships in an effort to profitably engage with key outside powers with significant stakes in the region.³⁵ The two observers, currently, are the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG), and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA).³⁶

³³Islam, M. (2023). Bangladesh and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): Future Dynamics. *BIISS Journal*, 44(1), 1–19.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371475272_Bangladesh_and_Indian_Ocean_Rim_Association_IORA_The_Future_Dynamics

³⁴*Member States*. (n.d.). IORA. Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/member-states>

³⁵*Dialogue Partners*. (n.d.). IORA. Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/dialogue-partners>

³⁶*IORA Observer Organization*. (n.d.). IORA. Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/iora-observer-organization>

The IORA Council of Ministers (COM) is the organisation's highest decision-making body, also referred to as the Primary Body. The composition includes the Minister of Foreign Affairs (or equivalent) from each member state. The Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) convenes biannually to advance the agenda of the IORA and review recommendations put forth by the working groups and forums comprising officials, business representatives, and academics. The aim is to implement policies and projects that enhance the well-being of individuals residing in the member-states of the Indian Ocean region.

The CSO, consisting of senior government officials from IORA member states, plays a vital role in reviewing, discussing, and providing recommendations on different agenda items within the IORA. The recommendations are subsequently submitted to the Council of Ministers (COM) for ultimate approval. The Secretary-General is selected by the Council of Ministers (COM) for a three-year term, which can be extended for one more term. The selection is made from a pool of candidates nominated by the member-states. The selection process for the IORA Secretariat follows the criteria of qualification, experience, and suitability outlined in the staff regulations. The Secretary-General is accountable to the COM for all association activities. The Secretary-General attends all Council meetings and fulfils other assigned functions. He/She submits an annual report to the Council of Ministers regarding the activities of the association. The corporate sector is represented by the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF), while the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) is intended to serve as its intellectual arm. Government officials for trade and economic cooperation make up the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI). Mauritius hosts the IORA Secretariat.³⁷

IORA has made significant progress in the last few years. Growth has been continuous in both the scope and intensity of regional collaboration. In November 2013, when Australia assumed

³⁷IORA. (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int>

the chair position during the 13th COM held in Perth, the IOR-ARC changed its name as the IORA.³⁸ This was a significant step that demonstrated the association's renewed commitment to bolstering its operations. Under the banner of 'Strengthening Maritime Cooperation for a Peaceful, Stable, and Prosperous Indian Ocean', Indonesia hosted the inaugural IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta on March 7, 2017, to mark the organisation's 20th anniversary. The Jakarta Summit is seen as a turning point in the IORA countries' renewed resolve to step up IORA collaboration. The host, Indonesian President Joko Widodo, observed that the Summit was a strategic and progressive step by IORA leaders in realising a more able and faster IORA capable of dealing with both current situations and future challenges. Following the summit, a strategic vision statement known as the Jakarta Concord was adopted, outlining key principles and goals that may eventually be converted into an IOR rules-based framework.³⁹

The Council of Ministers' meeting took place on 6th March 2017 prior to the Leaders' Summit. The first IORA Action Plan, which outlines IORA's flagship initiatives for 2017-2021, was warmly received by the ministers. They also approved the 'IORA Declaration on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism', which enhances the collective dedication to establishing a secure, prosperous, and interconnected Indian Ocean region by addressing the issue of terrorism and extremism. The necessity of cooperating to address the circumstances that support the emergence and spread of violent extremism and terrorism in society was also emphasised by the member-states.⁴⁰ With its strong emphasis on economic opportunities and challenges, IORA has strayed significantly from its historical focus by addressing terrorism for

³⁸Attri, V. N. (n.d.). *Growing Strength of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) And Emerging Global Development Paradigms* [Slide show]. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).
<https://hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/6606/Growing%20strength%20of%20IORA.pdf>

³⁹Panda, A. (2017, March 8). Indian Ocean RIM Association concludes First-Ever Leaders' Summit. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 16, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/indian-ocean-rim-association-concludes-first-ever-leaders-summit/>

⁴⁰Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). (2017, March 7). *Leaders' summit in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) & its related meetings* [Press release]. Jakarta. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-03/iora-leaders-summit-press-release.pdf>

the first time. Though they may just be symbolic, the Jakarta Summit's results represent an important first step in the direction of increased regional collaboration; a distinctive kind of regionalism though, which differs from other land-based regional forums. Some analysts like to call it marine regionalism, which is basically based on codification of rules and regulations, joint management and protection of important sea lanes, and exploring further areas of cooperation, such as politico-strategic, on the back of these arrangements.⁴¹ In addition to official meetings, IORA facilitated engagement of the private sectors of member states through a Business Summit on March 6, 2017. The purpose of the summit was to enhance business cooperation in the region and it attracted participation from over 300 businesses.⁴²

6.4.1 The Potential of IORA

Five interconnected components make up the Indian Ocean marine regionalism. It is, first and foremost, ocean-based, with important implications pertaining to the utilisation of the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the security paradigm in question is holistic in nature, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of security. Thirdly, because its foundation is an ecological understanding of the Indian Ocean along with its numerous interactions, it is less artificial and more organic. Fourthly, it is an approach centred around people that guarantees a greater say for the voices of communities and peoples of the Indian Ocean in matters concerning their human security. Last but not the least, it is a paradigm that, as opposed to one that is purely state-based and based primarily on competition, indicates a much higher level of regional collaboration to jointly handle common problems. Therefore, the main goal of this marine regionalism

⁴¹Klecha-Tylec, K. (2017). The theoretical and practical dimensions of regionalism in East Asia. In *Springer eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40262-8>

⁴²Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). (2017, March 7). *Leaders' summit in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) & its related meetings* [Press release]. Jakarta. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-03/iora-leaders-summit-press-release.pdf>

paradigm is to efficiently address a range of non-traditional security issues while promoting the growth of confidence among the stakeholders.⁴³

The Indian Ocean alone provides potential for the IORA. It is becoming a significant hub for international activity. It is evident that most of the region's population is economically vibrant; but there are also a lot of non-traditional security challenges that are presenting significant difficulties in realising the full economic potential. It has been found by scholars that these issues are best addressed within the structure of a regional multilateral framework. According to former IORAG Chairman Timothy Doyle, the IORA could potentially become the platform to evolve and coordinate joint efforts because it is a regional organisation. In essence, the current resurgence of curiosity in the IORA coincides with a momentous and potentially favourable shift in world politics.

According to experts, there is more space for an otherwise low-profile grouping like the IORA to play a greater role in ensuring growth, peace, and stability of the region due to both the long-term structural transformations and the current geopolitical development. IORA member nations are still in the process of identifying and pursuing the concerns that may drive their collective efforts. Maritime security and safety, facilitation of trade and investment, fisheries management, catastrophe risk management, collaboration in academia, research, and technology, tourism and cross-cultural exchanges, blue economy, etc. are some of these concerns, as have been outlined by the IORA so far.⁴⁴

⁴³Rumley, D., Doyle, T., & Chaturvedi, S. (2012). 'Securing' the Indian Ocean? Competing regional security constructions. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 8(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2012.683623>

⁴⁴Kaul, A. (2017, March 7). IORA Nations Decide to Support Each Other to Counter Terrorism. *India Today*.

6.4.2 India in the IORA

India is a founding member of the IOR-ARC, the predecessor of the IORA. The Indian Ocean rim is a diverse region characterised by a variety of languages, cultures, and religions; and its connection to India is reflected in its name itself. The IOR countries vary in terms of size, area, and economic strength, and the IORA was established in 1997 during a meeting in Mauritius to address some of their common issues. Though the first meeting of the association was held in Port Louis, Mauritius, where the Secretariat is also located, the grouping's origins can be traced back to a speech delivered by Nelson Mandela in New Delhi in 1995. The chief guest for the Republic Day, invited by the then Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, Mandela expressed the idea of exploring the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim of socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours by India and South Africa. He hoped that such an organisation could benefit developing countries within multilateral institutions like that in the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the Non-Aligned Movement. Following Mandela's vision, India and South Africa were instrumental in building this association.⁴⁵

In 2011, India assumed the role of Chair of the IORA, signifying a momentous milestone for the organisation. At that time around, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) was facing emerging geo-strategic challenges, in the backdrop of an assertive China intending to take control of some important international sea lanes, prompting a significant revitalisation of the association. The process began with a focus on redefining the priorities of IORA. The 11th COM Meeting in Bengaluru in November 2011 identified six priority areas based on an Indian proposal to enhance cooperation among member-states of IORA in the future. The areas of focus included maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, academic, science and technological collaboration, and tourism and cultural

⁴⁵Haidar, S. (2023, October 16). How is the Indian Ocean Rim Association a key bloc for India? *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-is-the-indian-ocean-rim-association-a-key-bloc-for-india-explained/article67421544.ece>

exchange. Also, Australia, Indonesia, and South Africa, the other three G-20 countries, were chosen as the next Chairs of IORA, joining India in leadership roles.

Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, noted IORA's convergence of objectives with Indian maritime regime in the offing, SAGAR, during his visit to Mauritius on March 12, 2015. India's growing interest in the IORA in particular and the larger IOR in general was further stressed by Minister of State for External Affairs Gen (Retd.) V.K. Singh during the 15th COM meeting at Padang, Indonesia on 23rd October, 2015, where he presented a 10-point formula for India's engagement with the association, including some financial commitment. One can easily see that India's focus has been on soft, developmental cooperation, to avert escalation with neighbours with whom it is engaged in other bilateral or multilateral platforms. In such a context, the Indian Ocean Dialogue was initiated by India during this period. The inaugural Indian Ocean Dialogue was held in Kochi, Kerala from September 5-7, 2015. This event served as a Track 1.5 platform, facilitating discussions among government officials, academics, and strategic thinkers.⁴⁶

Over the years, and with continuously growing influence of China in the international waters around it, India has consciously shifted the focus from purely benign issues to issues with some strategic significance with regard to the IORA. In fact, New Delhi had to do this; having invested so deeply in marine/ naval/ port infrastructure development in almost all the neighbouring states, it had to find a platform where the rationale behind its working could be established and endorsed. In recent times, India has maintained a robust military presence in close coordination with other regional navies in the IOR. India has been responsible for ensuring the secure transportation of commercial containers, not only its own, but others' as well; also, the Indian Navy is regularly conducting anti-piracy operations at different seas, and

⁴⁶*Indian Ocean Rim Association and India's Role*. (2017, March 7). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORA_new.pdf

preventing illegal, unreported, and unregulated exploitation of the ocean. India has emerged as a favoured partner for Western powers and has taken on the role of a net security provider in the region. Its navy is recognised as the first responder in times of crisis. The Indian Navy successfully prevented two consecutive hijacking attempts within a span of 24 hours on January 30, 2024, near the Somali coast, showing its capability and dominance over these waters.⁴⁷ Though this apparently has nothing to do with the IORA; nevertheless, leading a forum of IOR states and acting decisively on ground (here, on water though), surely elevates New Delhi's standing in the regional and global strategic calculations. Moreover, showing off naval strength and forming security alliances such as the QUAD, though informally, further bolsters its regional preponderance.

India became the Vice Chair of the grouping at the 23rd Meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers (COM) on October 11, 2023, in Colombo. It proposed the adoption of the Indo-Pacific Outlook (IOIP) at the November 2022 COM meeting, which was subsequently adopted by the IORA. From an Indian perspective, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) must be considered within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific due to its increasing economic and strategic importance. The IOIP emphasises the increasing interconnection between the two oceans as a fundamental aspect of the Indo-Pacific region. The statement emphasises the platform's commitment to pursuing cooperation with the Indo-Pacific countries and their associations in its established six priority areas, and more importantly in two cross-cutting issues, namely maritime safety and security. The objectives of the IOIP are derived from the priority areas of IORA and encompass additional areas such as connectivity, unsustainable debt, resilient supply chains, and an equitable, transparent, and non-discriminatory environment. This does not demand a lot of imagination to find a covert reference to China, while reading those 'additional

⁴⁷Srivastava, R. (2024). Indian Ocean RIM Association Gaining Deeper Significance. *Indian Defence Review*, Net edition. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indian-ocean-rim-association-gaining-deeper-significance/>

areas'. The IOIP of the IORA discusses India's IPOI, which stands for Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative; and exhibits elements of convergence. The IPOI, launched in 2019, aims to establish a community of stakeholders by forming partnerships with similar countries through practical cooperation in an open and inclusive manner. The pillars of IPOI align with the priority areas of IORA and the areas emphasised in IOIP.⁴⁸

ASEAN holds significant importance in the Indo-Pacific region, and plays a crucial role in providing regional security and economic architecture. The IOIP also refers to the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and identifies it as a 'similar document'. IOIP suggests that IORA and the ASEAN, as significant multilateral platforms in the Indo-Pacific region, should enhance the alignment and cooperation of their perspectives and initiatives. Recently, IORA and ASEAN signed a MoU during the 43rd ASEAN and related Summits in Jakarta, Indonesia in September, 2023. The MoU seeks to enhance collaboration between the two institutions in order to effectively implement IOIP and promote cooperation for the mutual advantage of their respective member-states.⁴⁹

6.4.3 Significance of the IOR for India

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world, located to the south of India, west of Australia, and east of Africa. The region encompasses 70.56 million Sq. KM and contains significant mineral and oil deposits. The Indian Ocean has been of significant importance in global geopolitics due to its economic value and power projection mechanisms since millennia. The convergence of trading routes from the Strait of Hormuz to the Malacca Strait in the Arabian Sea and South China Sea respectively sets it as the most heavily trafficked trading

⁴⁸Pandey, P. (2023, November 14). *IORA's Indo-Pacific Outlook and its Significant Role in the Region*. Indian Council of World Affairs. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10176&lid=6492

⁴⁹Ibid.

corridor globally. Approximately 80% of global trade is transported annually through the region by more than a lakh ships. The geographical location of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is of great importance to India, as it has the longest coastline along this ocean. As a result of such a vast coastline, India's large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) positions it not only as the leading economic claimant but also a significant actor in ensuring security and promoting rules-based order in the region.⁵⁰

The Indian Ocean region is home to one-third of the world's population, totalling 2.6 billion people. Additionally, it serves as a major hub for global oil trade, handling 80% of the total volume. Furthermore, it plays a significant role in container cargo carrying operations, accounting for 50% of the world carriers, and bulk cargo, representing 33% of global shipments. The region's total production of goods and services amounts to USD 1 trillion, while intra-IORA trade is estimated at USD 800 billion. India's engagement in other regional organisations, such as SAARC and the BIMSTEC, encounter their own set of difficulties. The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) has made progress, but it remains primarily led by the US, along with its military allies Australia and Japan. China is making efforts to engage India's neighbouring countries through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, and China-South Asian Countries Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre. These Chinese initiatives, naturally, exclude India. In this context, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) serves as a secure and stable platform for India and such other regional powers seeking to avoid the ongoing competition between major powers. Pakistan has not been admitted to the IORA, since its application in 2001, due to its failure in extending the MFN status to India. This makes

⁵⁰Srivastava, R. (2024). Indian Ocean RIM Association Gaining Deeper Significance. *Indian Defence Review*, Net edition. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indian-ocean-rim-association-gaining-deeper-significance/>

the IORA a less contentious space for India compared to other groupings like the SCO with equal or more economic potential.⁵¹

Considering the enormous potential as well as challenges the IOR presents to India, it is really in need of a multilateral platform run on the basis of liberal, democratic values. India cannot bypass the geographic reality of being at the centre of the IOR, and consequently it is not in a position to shred off its geo-strategic interests and responsibilities as well. Accepting the realities is probably the only way to mend it in one's favour; and in the face of an aggressive China and in the backdrop of a China-US strategic rivalry in the IOR, it seems the IORA is the most potent instrument in handling such a delicate situation.

6.5 Conclusion

India's primary aim in erecting sub-regional platforms was to engage its neighbours in larger bodies, outside bilateral dialogues, to apprise them of the benefits of multilateral interaction which was stifled under the confines of SAARC; and it was largely triggered by the geopolitical developments of the 1990s. As a result, a lot of such associations, formal or informal, had sprung up during that time, which includes the BIMSTEC, the MGC, and the IORA. Whether these forums have been successful in fulfilling their mandates or able to meet the desired objectives for India, are big questions though. The amount of words spoken about these associations, in diplomatic interactions, academic seminars or in media outlets would probably outnumber the actual man hours dedicated to make them function in the real world. Considered as a failure now, SAARC has been able to convene 18 summit meetings in 30 years until 2014, before going into dormancy; whereas the BIMSTEC, perceived as a potent alternative to

⁵¹Haidar, S. (2023, October 16). How is the Indian Ocean Rim Association a key bloc for India? *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-is-the-indian-ocean-rim-association-a-key-bloc-for-india-explained/article67421544.ece>

SAARC, could host only 5 summits in almost 27 years of its existence now. When the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted the BIMSTEC leaders in parallel to the BRICS summit of 2016, or invited them to his second swearing in ceremony in 2019, hope was raised about the platform. In the last decade the organisation has established its permanent headquarters and appointed secretary-generals periodically, consolidating its institutional structures. While these developments were made, India's trade with the BIMSTEC members had actually decreased, as a percentage of its total foreign trade. Emitting visible energy and vigour at the outset, the organisation is yet to come to consensus on two major issues, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), the two main points of friction in SAARC.

The MGC serves as the Indian socio-cultural outreach initiative for the lower Mekong states, all of which are members of the ASEAN. The BIMSTEC, which was originally conceived as an economic bloc, is supposed to be working as a bridge between India and the ASEAN, and the MGC is supposed to play the role of force multiplier in that direction, working in the social sector. India's engagement in these two platforms has the additional objective of countering the Chinese influence in its vicinity, other than the main objective of consolidating neighbourhood ties. Now, China has a trade volume with ASEAN to the tune of USD 722 billion in 2022, whereas India's figure stood at USD 110 billion. Chinese FDI to these states accounted for USD 18.5 billion in the same year, whereas India's total FDI during the four - year period from 2019 to 2022 stood at USD 55.5 billion; and, this FDI outflow was heavily skewed in favour of Singapore alone, to the tune USD 51.5 billion. These figures indicate Indian position vis-à-vis China in these states, let alone their cultural and civilisational bonds. Goodwill is the necessary starting point for any cooperation initiative, but it alone cannot make those work. Established in 1997, and given so much importance on paper, the BIMSTEC had its first meeting of foreign ministers only in 2023. The second has just been concluded in July 2024 though. With a meagre investment of about USD 4 million in some low visibility QIPs

(apparently of high impact though), the MGC has practically remained limited to routine meetings among the officials of different levels, repeating the same commitments; and that too along the side-lines of the various ASEAN plus conclaves. If one goes through the Joint Ministerial Statement of the 12th MGC Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in July, 2023, s/he would be surprised to see no concrete plan of action with any realistic deadline in such a document. Same can be said about the IORA, which also has remained confined to setting goals, drafting vision documents, or defining priority areas, etc. Considering such state of affairs with these platforms, it remains a bothersome question as to whether these would anyway help India in reimagining and reshaping its neighbourhood in line with the Act East or the Neighbourhood First policies.

One interesting point to be noted here is, though these sub-regional cooperation mechanisms remained mostly symbolic, India's bilateral ties with the member-states had gone mostly upwards during the same period; in terms of trade volume and value, amending of political differences or security cooperation. On the contrary, another intriguing point is, though India has a FTA with the ASEAN as a bloc, it is yet to chalk out bilateral ones with its members except for Thailand. Therefore, the comparative advantage of engaging the neighbours, at least from the economic point of view, within the sub-regional settings cannot be proved, but cannot be refuted either. What seems to be working in favour is the convergence of interests nurtured to give a concrete shape. In this respect, India's neighbourhood policy needs more careful and case-to-case approach to each of the mechanisms than adopting a general approach expecting to fit all. Moreover, the problem of overlap needs to be addressed. It is not a very practical proposition to negotiate a FTA for the BIMSTEC while negotiating the same at bilateral levels with its members like Bangladesh or Myanmar. Situation has become more complicated with the coming of the RCEP which might seem to be having more prospects than a BIMSTEC FTA; thus, making Thailand and Myanmar more indifferent to its fast implementation.

The MGC, without an institutional structure and regular financing, shall remain dormant as the members are bilaterally and multilaterally (in other platforms) engaged with India. The IORA seems to have lost direction with the inclusion of members from different political and economic settings. An extremely important strategic theatre like the Indian Ocean Region requires a more streamlined approach to common challenges among the like-minded states. It is quite difficult to imagine that India and Somalia are coming together in combating piracy, or France and Iran sharing resources to tackle international terrorism in the region. Among the four littoral states of South Asia (excluding Pakistan), India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are members of the BIMSTEC, and all four (including the Maldives) are the IORA members; and both these associations speak about scientific management of the ocean and equitable utilisation of marine resources, creating confusion with regard to each of their scope.

In the backdrop of present China-Pakistan relations, developments in Afghanistan, and struggle for regional influence between New Delhi and Beijing, the revival of an overarching cooperation mechanism spanning South Asia, whether in SAARC or anything novel, is quite difficult. At the same time, without a peaceful neighbourhood, if not friendly, India's economic surge and global aspirations are hard to realise. Therefore, sub-regionalism is here to stay. The only thing that is debated is if those architectures can be really used to attain the specified objectives. Without a proper roadmap and well thought out complementarity among them, it will be merely beating the bushes. Hope is on the rise as another BIMSTEC summit is scheduled in the coming September. Without a functional BIMSTEC, a regional framework would be elusive, and smaller scale cooperation initiatives like the MGC would hardly yield any results. If truly operationalised, the BIMSTEC has the ability to provide direction to the IORA too, setting an example of maritime collaboration in the Bay of Bengal.

Chapter 7

India in Sub-Regional Initiatives: BBIN and IMTT Highway

7.1 Introduction

To come out of the regional confines and to fulfil its global aspirations, India has been in a process of transition with regard to its neighbourhood policy since the mid-1990s. This desire to take on a more proactive role at the international stage is seriously dependent on its ability to negotiate the complexities in the neighbourhood though, as we have noted previously. As a result, New Delhi had embarked on a journey to restructure its engagement with the immediate neighbours through the means of sub-regional mechanisms of different character and various mandates. In the last chapter we have discussed three such platforms, the BIMSTEC, the MGC and the IORA, which are essentially organised efforts under formal structures, though their institutional cohesion varies to a great degree. Apart from those formal ones, India had erected some informal arrangements as well which were aimed to serve the same purpose but in a different way altogether. BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal initiative) or the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are such informal mechanisms that are discussed in this chapter. These mechanisms are based on loosely designed deliberative platforms, backed by the concerned governments' time to time nods. These platforms lack in any office, secretariat, permanent and dedicated staff, etc., and, rather functions on the basis of coordination among the line staff of the partner countries' various ministries regular interactions.

Due to such a low profile, these initiatives have drawn less attention from the domestic media in the involved countries or in the international circuit. Moreover, these cooperation initiatives are primarily based on developmental activities, and focus on particular projects, instead of delving into broader political tie-ups. Interestingly, over the last decade or so, if we take these

two, the BBIN and the IMTT Highway for example, these have been found to be more successful in making some real progress on the ground, unlike the formal platforms. Their efforts on addressing the common challenges with instruments that benefit every stakeholder involved, and on the basis of consensus, have actually helped these two initiatives to deliver. This raises a difficult question as to whether South Asian states cooperate better on informal platforms. Like SAARC, its perceived alternatives like the BIMSTEC (event to a greater extent than SAARC) have remained limited to more talks than action on the field.

The scope of this chapter is not to probe this question though; rather it tries to evaluate the progress of the BBIN and the IMTT Highway and causes of their relative success and how they could help India in reshaping its neighbourhood policy. Also, as we have already noted in the previous chapter that, sub-regional mechanisms have become an important arm in the larger agenda of India's neighbourhood outreach and they are here to stay; but, as all these are products of only three decades of experiments, their evolution seems to be ongoing and what shape they would finally take is yet to unfold. In this backdrop, a proper stock taking of the informal mechanisms might help in developing an understanding of the future course.

7.2 BBIN

The BBIN sub-region houses two of the three largest economies in South Asia, including India and Bangladesh, and excluding Pakistan; and hosts around 1.6 billion people and accounts for about 87% of South Asia's GDP. The BBIN can be termed as the growth hub of South Asia for several reasons; and one among them is, according to a World Bank estimate of 2018, the top four high-growth countries in 2020 in South Asia would be India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the projected growth rate figures were not

met; nonetheless, these four remained on top anyway.¹ With a larger connectivity drive under the BBIN, with a fully operationalised Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) guaranteeing free movement of vehicles among these four states, has the capacity to transform the sub-region into a prominent economic hub of South Asia. In addition, this can significantly add up to their current GDP, as has been remarked by the then Head of the World Bank India in 2021. Its report on 'Connecting to Thrive: Challenges and Opportunities of Transport Integration in Eastern South Asia' (2021) states that establishing a seamless transport connectivity between India and Bangladesh has the potential to boost national income by up to 17% in Bangladesh and 8% in India.² Such is the underlying possibility of the sub-regional grouping which came into prominence in 2015 by signing the Motor Vehicle Agreement.

7.2.1 Evolution of BBIN

Over seventy years ago, South Asia was among the most integrated regions of the world, and about a century ago the Bay of Bengal area was one of the most thriving business hotspots. Most of these connections came to a sudden halt, and then got broken and the population was split apart by the political boundaries established in 1947. Because of the artificial nature of those borders, the region got transformed into one of the least interconnected economically, as a result of political discord arising out of the partition. During the last three decades or so, India has been trying to rebuild those linkages and recreate that environment of regular economic as well as socio-political exchange. Such efforts were first seen to be pushed forward by a regional framework in 1985, when the SAARC came into existence. Later on, in view of SAARC's

¹Livani, T., Rizwan, N., & Kathuria, S. (2019). Inclusive Regional Trade: Promoting the economic empowerment of women in the BBIN region. *Antyajaa*, 4(1), 33–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632719836801>

²Press Trust of India. (2021, March 9). BBIN countries in South Asia can be economic growth pole: WB India head. *Business Standard*. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/bbin-countries-in-south-asia-can-be-economic-growth-pole-wb-india-head-121030901373_1.html

inability to progress at a desired speed, New Delhi shifted its energy to ‘micro-management’ of different parts of the region differently, on the back of sub-regional cooperation instruments. First of such platforms came in the form of South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) in 1996. This was later endorsed by SAARC in 1997. Along with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, India conceptualised the growth quadrangle especially keeping the development of its north-eastern states in mind. That was the first step towards what we call the BBIN today.

The primary logic behind this framework was that these areas were organically connected due to their shared history, culture, language and ethnic backgrounds; and the physical linkages along the borders were still in a condition of revival. Moreover, as all of them were part of the larger regional forum SAARC, it was possible to establish special duty regimes among them for easier trade and investment, without violating the WTO protocols, of which India became a signatory just a year ago (in 1995). The goal of this initiative was to accelerate the process of economic integration on a smaller scale. It was believed that the growth quadrangle might be a viable answer to the socio-economic difficulties that were plaguing this sub-region, and that it could efficiently skirt the problem of political tensions between India and Pakistan in SAARC. Also, this effort was in tune with the Look East Policy, the doctrine that started dominating India’s neighbourhood policy edifice since the early 1990s. The sectors that were given focus primarily were the environment, energy and power, trade and investment, transportation and tourism. It may be pertinent to note here, the year SAGQ officially came into being, in 1997, the previous version of the BIMSTEC, the BIST-EC also came in the regional picture.

Soon after, the member-states of the SAGQ approached the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for technical guidance as well as financial support to implement projects for the sub-region’s development, and that way it was formalised into the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) in 2001. As of February 2023, the SASEC countries, under this

mechanism, have executed 79 capital investment projects financed by the ADB. These projects, which focus mainly on the transport, trade facilitation, energy, economic corridor, and health sectors, have a total value of approximately USD 18.41 billion.³ Within tenure of 21 years, the value and volume of the work is not negligible, but it is not up to the potential of the sub-region as well. Expanding the domain of the originally conceived SAGQ, after transforming into the SASEC, the body co-opted Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2014, and Myanmar in 2017, into its fold. One may ascribe the subpar performance of SASEC to this expanding mandate and membership. Maritime neighbours like Sri Lanka and Maldives are undoubtedly very significant in India's outreach to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the larger world; but the logic of their inclusion in a sub-regional grouping consisting of land-locked states like Nepal and Bhutan along with India and Bangladesh which share very long land boundaries, and connected to the former two intricately, is not clear. Inclusion of Myanmar in the platform suffers from similar issues as India does not have or endorse an open border with Myanmar like it has with Nepal and Bhutan; neither it is that deeply linked to India in everyday affairs like the two Himalayan neighbours of the north.

Delving deeper into this, it becomes quite apparent that the inclusions were made considering India's then bilateral relations with these states. Whether it is prudent to attain some short-term objectives, however important that may be, by restructuring an institution which, in its original form, holds promises in the long run is a question to ponder upon though. Moreover, all the three newly joined members are parts of other different sub-regional mechanisms with different mandates as well. At any rate, the cooperation among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal under the SAGQ framework, institutionalised under the SASEC, thus somewhat lost its track. Meanwhile, a parallel and informal network among them, called BBIN, following the initial

³*What is SASEC?* (n.d.). SASEC. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=what-is-sasec>

letters of the members' names, got going since the signing of the Motor Vehicles Agreement in 2015. Therefore, one can identify the current BBIN's roots in the SAGQ; though in the last one decade it had outgrown its roots in every way, holding more promises for the future.



*Figure 20: BBIN area.
Source: The Daily Star archive*

7.2.2 The BBIN MVA

The four members went for the sub-regional agreement to speed up and streamline the movement of people and goods after the SAARC MVA failed to take off during the 2014 SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, due to a last-minute surprise from Pakistan. In June 2015, the transport ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal signed the MVA in Thimphu, Bhutan; instead of Kathmandu as was initially planned. Despite Bhutan having the greatest potential to gain from the agreement, the ratification process had encountered difficulties there only, mainly owing to concerns about the environment. The remaining three parties to the MVA have ratified the document, and are on the path to implement it on the ground. The

strength of this kind of initiative lies in its flexibility, and the BBIN has shown that in handling the matter so far. Though India, Nepal and Bangladesh have proceeded with the spirit of the agreement, they still hold hope for Bhutan joining it at some later stage. The Joint Statement of the signatories, after signing the MVA in Thimphu, claimed that the MVA, once came into force, could boost regional trade by a whopping 60% and outside trade by 30%. A Friendship Motor Rally was organised in October 2015 to popularise the initiative and make all stakeholders aware of the benefits.⁴

South Asia is characterised by low integration and connectivity compared to other regions globally. The proportion of intra-regional trade among the South Asian countries is approximately five percent of their total trade. One of the main reasons for the region's economic potential being underutilised is this lack of connectivity and integration. The primary method of cargo movement between countries in the region is through trans-shipment arrangements at the border points. Procedural delays, infrastructure bottlenecks like parking and logistics facilities, as well as the safety of cargo inside these facilities, corruption, governance issues, and other factors exacerbate and complicate already existing problems of doing business.⁵ This BBIN MVA came as a relief in such a context.

The arrangement was planned to be rolling out in phased manner; like having bilateral agreements among the members first, and then only proceeding to sign multilateral protocols. India has already had free vehicular and people's movements regimes with Nepal and Bhutan; and a transit regime with Bangladesh. Therefore, it practically comes down to connecting Bangladesh with the already existing mechanisms, streamlining the nuances for multilateral movements of cargo and passengers. Post-ratification, the three countries have held several

⁴Ramaswamy, S. (2015, June 22). A Boost to Sub-Regionalism in South Asia. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 6, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/a-boost-to-sub-regionalism-in-south-asia/>

⁵*Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement: Facilitating implementation and stakeholder buy-in in the BBIN sub-region (BBINMVA)*. (n.d.). CUTS CITEE. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from <https://cuts-citee.org/bbinmva/>

rounds of discussions and have been able to come to formalise the operational regulations, and some pilot shipments of cargo have also been run to check the real-life conditions. For passenger movements, the protocols are yet to be signed. Had the Covid-19 pandemic not come, probably the agreement would have been operationalised by now, at least with regard to cargo movement.

After a period of lull, the MVA came into discussions once again during March, 2022, when India hosted the other members in New Delhi to deliberate on the future course of action. An enabling Memorandum of Understanding was signed by India, Bangladesh and Nepal to expedite the process of free movement as soon as possible. Bhutan, yet to ratify the treaty, participated in the meeting as an observer, and did not sign the MoU as a result.⁶ Another notable thing is that this MVA is highly dependent on physical infrastructures, especially modern, technology-enabled border check posts; and, India, Nepal and Bangladesh have already created a bunch of them, naming them ICPs (Integrated Check Posts), and some more are under construction. So is the situation with roads, connecting the industrial and commercial hubs to the borders; some of them have already been completed under the auspices of the SASEC, and more are in progress now, making the possibility of the MVA coming into force really bright now.

7.2.3 Other Areas of Cooperation

Though the Motor Vehicle Agreement signed in 2015 is largely considered as the first step into recent cooperation among the BBIN states, the truth is discussion on areas such as power and

⁶Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2022, March 8). *Meeting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA)* [Press release]. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34935/Meeting+of+Bangladesh+Bhutan+India+and+Nepal+Motor+Vehicles+Agreement+BBIN+MVA#:~:text=Ministry%20of%20External%20Affairs%20Government%20of%20India&text=A%20meetin g%20of%20India%2C%20Bangladesh,Secretary%2C%20Ministry%20of%20External%20Affairs>

energy production and their trade, joint management of international waterways precedes the MVA. Connectivity has always remained in the agenda of multilateral dialogues though. BBIN runs on the back of Joint Working Group (JWG) mechanism; and the inaugural meetings of such working groups on water and power, and transit and connectivity took place in Dhaka on April 18th and 19th, 2013, respectively. Indian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese officials joined the meetings. The meeting of the working group on water and power focused on the collaboration among the participating countries in managing the waters of shared rivers, investigating the potential for joint basin management of these rivers, and leveraging the benefits of sub-regional cooperation in the hydroelectric power sector. On the other hand, the meeting of the working group on transit and connectivity primarily discussed the implementation of measures to improve road and railway networks between the three countries.⁷

The second round of meetings of the JWGs on sub-regional cooperation among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) on Water Resources Management and Power/ Hydropower and on Connectivity and Transit took place in New Delhi on January 30-31, 2015. The working group on water resources management and power/ hydropower assessed the current collaboration in this field and decided to explore the possibilities of power trade and inter-grid connectivity among the four countries, along with the potential for increased collaboration in future power projects. The JWG on connectivity and transit conducted a thorough examination of the present arrangements, and stressed on the importance of coming to sub-regional agreements in facilitating the transportation through motor vehicles and railways. The meeting discussed potential cargo transportation options, including both roads and railways, as well as bus routes, involving multiple countries, in addition to the existing bilateral routes; thus, laying the foundation for the MVA that was about to come up. The importance of trade facilitation at

⁷Bangladesh-India-Bhutan meet in Dhaka Thursday, Friday. (2013, April 16). *Bangladesh Business News*.
<https://businessnews-bd.net/bangladesh-india-bhutan-meet-in-dhaka-thursday-friday/>

land border stations was also highlighted, which later paved the way for creation of multiple Integrated Check Posts across the borders among these four.⁸ Therefore, it can be seen clearly that the BBIN MVA, though the most notable achievement of the grouping so far, was not the sole focus of the association as such. We shall discuss the other areas of cooperation in the following sections.

Power and energy

Apart from connectivity initiatives, sharing of power grids have also been discussed in the BBIN forum, as it shows huge potential for cooperation in the sub-region. Studies have estimated that Nepal could have lost USD 11 billion value of GDP in nine years between 2008 and 2016 due to load shedding—an amount almost equal to the country’s GDP in 2008. On an average, that lost value would have amounted to more than 6% of its GDP annually during that period⁹; despite it being the neighbour of an energy giant India and itself having untapped sources of power generation. Related is the energy sector, with abundant prospects for cooperation. Among these four, industrially more developed India is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuel and coal for domestic consumption, whereas Bangladesh relies greatly on natural gas. On the contrary, Nepal and Bhutan have enormous potential for hydropower generation, but lack modern technology and finance. If combined together and provided with technical knowhow and financial support, an energy grid is possible and that would seriously

⁸Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2015, January 31). *Joint Press Release - The Second Joint Working Group (JWG) Meetings on Sub-Regional Cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN)* [Press release]. Retrieved January 8, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/24746/joint+press+release++the+second+joint+working+group+jwg+meetings+on+subregiona+l+cooperation+between+bangladesh+bhutan+india+and+nepal+bbin+in+new+delhi+january+3031+2015>

⁹Steinbuks, J., Timilsina, G., & Alberini, A. (2022, March 17). Economics of unreliable power supply: lessons from the 2006-2017 Nepal power crisis. *World Bank Blogs*. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/economics-unreliable-power-supply-lessons-2006-2017-nepal-power-crisis>

lessen India's dependence on distant foreign sources for energy and save cost. Other countries would benefit from power/ energy revenues, like Bhutan now enjoys with India.¹⁰

At present, Bangladesh's power sector is unable to match its fast-growing manufacturing sector; as a result, deficit in regular supply of power has become a common phenomenon. India is showing interest of switching to electric vehicles (EVs), and has already transformed its almost entire broad-gauge railway network into electric from diesel. All these come from an uncertainty about petroleum product's uninterrupted supply from West Asia and the Middle East, due to several geopolitical factors; currently most pressing being the Russia-Ukraine War and the ongoing Israel-Palestine crisis. In this context, if Nepal and Bhutan's potential of hydroelectric production from their mountainous rivers could be exploited, it will be a win-win situation for all parties. This can help Nepal and Bhutan earn a large amount of revenue which can be used for their domestic industrialisation push, presently lagging primarily due to investment scarcity; on the other hand, India and Bangladesh will be free from distant geopolitical developments that can potentially hamper their growth trajectory. To utilise this complementarity, a modern and equitable grid sharing among the members is all what is needed. Bilaterally, India has financed, constructed, and then bought back electricity from the same projects, since long in case of Bhutan, and recently from Nepal as well. Adding Bangladesh with the Indian grid to allow trade in electricity among the members under a duty-free regime, thus, can serve all the parties. Opportunities also exist for distributing the load throughout the BBIN countries due to variations in peak demand hours and weekly and seasonal holidays.

¹⁰Rahman, S. H., Wijayatunga, P. D. C., Gunatilake, H., & Fernando, P. N. (2012). *Energy trade in South Asia: opportunities and challenges* (1st ed.) [eBook]. Asian Development Bank.
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29703/energy-trade-south-asia.pdf>

Water resources

As this sub-region is crisscrossed by a maze of international rivers, there is not only potential but an urgent need of collaborative river management. The waters of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin are vital for the sustenance of over 500 million individuals residing in this region. Over time, the demand for water in this region will surely grow as the population expands and living standards rise. The problems of disparate water distribution and insufficiency can only be resolved by the implementation of regional planning. Furthermore, it will enhance the utilisation of existing water resources and contribute to the stability of water and energy supply in the sub-region. In order to accomplish this and enhance water availability during the arid season, it would be necessary to store water upstream to manage and equalise the water flow. Having said that, this making of dams and storing of water is fraught with political contestation though. India and Bangladesh have not been able to resolve their disputes with regard to international rivers, other than the Ganges, even after having institutionalised the negotiations through a Joint Rivers Commission. Bangladesh alleges India does not let go enough and equitable shares of water during the lean seasons, but leaves it to be inundated during the monsoon. Almost the same kind of issues India has with Nepal. Therefore, as bilateralism has already been proven to have failed in this case, a sub-regional initiative may work for the long run. As not only construction of dams and sharing of water, there are a host of issues involved such as who will build or finance the dam, how the lost land will be compensated for that upstream country, etc. which requires all stakeholders to come at one platform. If these issues are resolved by the BBIN, a revolution of sorts can be brought about with regard to electricity generation, inland water transportation, addressing of chemical contamination of rivers, and predicting and managing floods.

Social sector

There's a prospect in the social sector as well. Individually India is deeply connected to all the three states of the sub-region. If it plays the role of facilitator and connectivity improves as has been envisioned, social relations can be improved a lot. This would open the path for political stability in the sub-region which is required for long-term growth objectives. Besides, the immediate gains would be on the education, health and tourism sector.¹¹ In fact, New Delhi is now quite deeply engaged in capacity building in all the three states of the sub-region. It offers scholarships generously, allows Nepalese and Bhutanese youth to enrol in higher educational institutions on self-financed basis as well; moreover, India is enthusiastically providing access to its super-rich digital knowledge repositories to their institutions. For healthcare, a middle-class Bangladeshi's favourite destination is Kolkata, for linguistic commonness; gradually widening to south Indian states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu though. On the contrary, India is one of the biggest sources of tourists for all these neighbours. There are such areas of connections in almost every sphere of life for common people, providing traction to the bottom-up approach that a sub-regional architecture ideally takes.

7.2.4 The Way Ahead

BBIN is an unofficial grouping that mostly convenes at the senior officials' level. Its leaders do not assemble frequently to determine the programmes, at least under the BBIN banner, in contrast to SAARC; and it lacks a charter. However, it offers a huge opportunity for reciprocal assistance in fields that would immediately improve people's lives and enhance their social and economic well-being. This has been possible due to its flexibility, and that is, again, due to focusing less on grand gestures by the top of the governments or states, as was the case with

¹¹Sharma, R. (2015, June 11). *Setting the tone for future*. Arab News. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://www.arabnews.com/node/760086/amp>

SAARC. Owing to its low profile, supplementary sort of nature, programmes under SAARC will benefit from BBIN's success as well, and vice versa. In light of this, members may think about establishing a formal organisational structure for managing daily affairs and responding to emergencies; but it is probably better not to lay stress on summit-level meetings.

There is a possibility of changing its outlook as well. Instead of SAARC, for India the BIMSTEC holds greater potential with regard to its neighbourhood now. Following this, the BBIN can eventually be viewed as a sub-regional mechanism within the BIMSTEC framework, rather than under SAARC. The way India's neighbourhood policy shifted from its decades-old stand in the last 30 years or so, and to the direction of the east; BBIN offers the most cost effective solution in supporting that transition. As we have noticed in the previous chapter, the BIMSTEC has remained a platform for discussion and strategising among the members, rather than doing real work on the ground. With a thriving BBIN doing the heavy lifting in this sub-region can be a good starting point for a productive BIMSTEC as well.

7.3 The IMTT Highway

With respect to building of physical connectivity between Southeast Asian nations and India, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH or the IMTT Highway) remains most important as of today. The concept of a trilateral highway connecting India, Myanmar, and Thailand gained traction during a Trilateral Ministerial Summit on Transport and Connectivity held in Yangon, back in April 2002. In 2004, the parties involved decided to begin the work on the trilateral highway, also called the 'Highway of Opportunity and Friendship'. The governments of India, Myanmar, and Thailand, as well as the Asian Development Bank, agreed to cover the project's anticipated USD 700 million construction cost. The project, at that point, included the development of 78 KM of freshly constructed roads, 400 KM of

improvement in road condition, including the installation of all-weather access lanes, and the restoration or rebuilding of weakened or aged bridges of the colonial times. Facilitating the flow of people and ideas, in addition to commodities and services, was the main goal of the trilateral highway project.¹² India's goal of connecting to Southeast Asia by road and railways cannot be realised without active cooperation of the gateway states like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Once operationalised, a project like this would reap benefits for them as well; giving India's intended shift in neighbourhood policy a touch of ground reality.

IMTTH is a 1360 KM cross-border transit network that runs via Myanmar to link Mae Sot in Thailand with Moreh in the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur. The highway is currently perceived by New Delhi as a section of the 1,41,000 KM long Transnational Asian Highway, which travels through 32 member-states.¹³ New Delhi is also ambitious that this project can eventually be linked to India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in fulfilling its goal of solid, year-round road connectivity between its major partners in world affairs, Europe and Southeast Asia. Though this has not been a stated position, one can see these larger plans of connectivity as an Indian response to the Chinese BRI in the extended neighbourhood.

Since independence, the north-eastern states of India had seen lesser growth and development compared to other parts of the country. Some attribute this to lack of connectivity between these states and the industrial hubs of heartland India. These states are landlocked, as they are surrounded by Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, having no access to sea. Moreover, the 22 KM wide chicken's neck on the northern part of West Bengal, also called the Siliguri Corridor, is the only strip of land connecting the seven states of north-east with the rest of India.

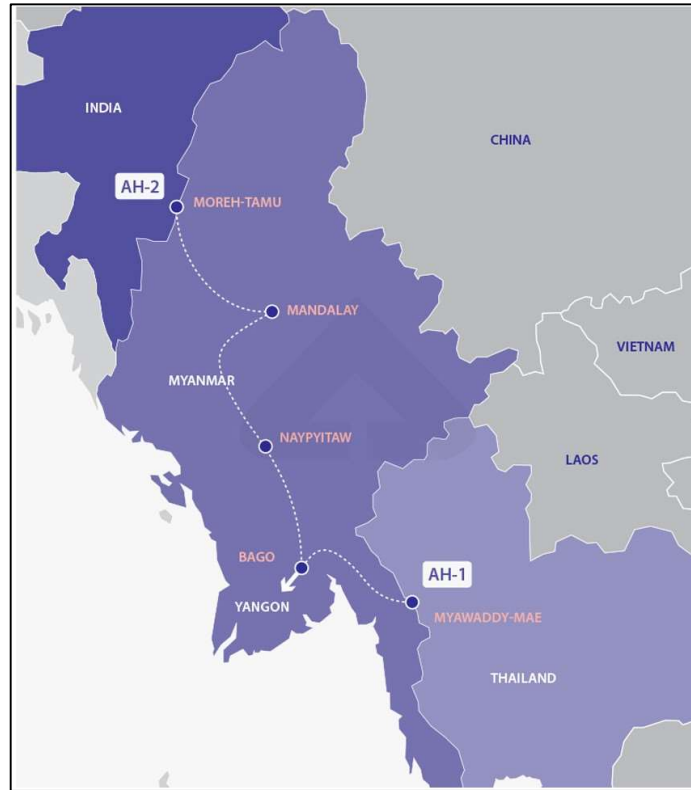
¹²Sharma, K. (2017). *Modi backs India-Myanmar-Thailand highways Indochina extension*. Nikkei Asia. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Modi-backs-IndiaMyanmarThailandhighway-extension>

¹³De, P. (2011). ASEAN-India connectivity: An Indian perspective. In F. Kimura & S. Umezaki (Eds.), *ASEAN-India Connectivity: The Comprehensive Asia Development Plan, Phase II* (1st ed., pp. 95–150). ERIA. <https://www.eria.org/CHAPTER%203%20%20ASEAN%20-%20India%20Connectivity%20An%20Indian%20Perspective.pdf>

Though railways are now being spread to all these states, due to its difficult terrain, that remains a herculean task, requiring a humongous financial commitment. Naturally, roadways are the lifeline for them, though that is not without difficulties as well. These seven provinces receive heavy monsoon due to their location and topography; and, as a result of that, the roads get frequently washed away by annual floods, especially in Assam, the link to the six others. Therefore, connectivity is largely dependent on seasonal fluctuations as well. All these make these seven states somewhat detached from the bustling Indian economy, registering very low growth rate and remaining busy in maintaining round-the-year normal business rather than expanding it. Only Sikkim is well connected among them as it falls on the western side of the Siliguri Corridor, and is pretty close to Siliguri.¹⁴

The IMTTH, which aims to connect Moreh to Mae Sot, would strengthen the road network and facilitate more trade in goods and services as well as more mobility for people; not only inside India, but it will also open up the Southeast Asian markets for these states. Businesses from other parts of India, which might like to tap the newly opened markets, would also have to make necessary connections to the businesses of this part; and that would generate more revenues for these states. In addition to that, this has an underlying security concern too. If during any future war with China the north-eastern states get disconnected, these roads can provide an alternate path for military supplies. The strategic vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor has always been a concern for New Delhi, and it has always been in search of an alternative route to the seven sisters of the north-east. By constructing the India-Myanmar Friendship Road, which stretches from Moreh/ Tamu border crossing to Kalewa in Myanmar, in 2001, New Delhi started exploring this alternative more than 20 years ago.

¹⁴Dikshit, K. R., & Dikshit, J. K. (2014). *North-East India: Land, People, and Economy* (1st ed.). Springer.



*Figure 21: The route of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.
Source: ASEAN Briefing, dated 16.08.2022*

7.3.1 Development of the ‘Highway to the East’

The 160 KM road that makes up the first section of the IMTTH was resurfaced in 2009 at a cost of USD 27.28 million by India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO); which also upgraded 132 KM of the road before turning it over to Myanmar. The Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa (TKK) road in Myanmar is being maintained by the Indian Government as well. Additionally, India has started working on preparing a Detailed Project Report (DPR) regarding the construction of causeways close to Kyadet, Myanmar; and also, for the building of a bridge over the Ayeyarwady River. When the minister-in-charge of Myanmar's Ministry of Construction visited India in February 2012, he proposed a different route for the Trilateral Highway while requesting India to build the 120 KM stretch of road between Kalewa and Yagyi, and New

Delhi had accepted that additional work.¹⁵ Both sides discussed boosting commercial, cultural, tourism-related, and other contacts between their peoples by improving connectivity between the two nations during the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's state visit to Myanmar in May 2012. Emphasising the consequences of connectivity, Prime Minister Singh committed in the joint declaration that India would repair (and upgrade) 71 bridges on the Tamu-Kalewa Friendship Road.¹⁶ India also agreed to upgrade the Kalewa-Yagyi road to highway standards by 2016 to connect it to the Trilateral Highway grid, and Myanmar committed to do the same for the Yagyi-Monywa stretch, declared during the meeting of the Indian prime minister and Myanmar president.¹⁷ India, thus, has shown generosity and open-mindedness to the project since its beginning.

To expedite the flow of goods and passenger vehicles between the three countries, India also suggested, in 2015, that a Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) be established among Myanmar, Thailand, and India; like the one it had been promoting in BBIN. Since then inter-governmental talks between the three partners are on, though they are yet to reach any agreement on this. In August 2016, two MoUs were signed by President of Myanmar U Htin Kyaw during his visit to India, with regard to the improvement of the existing bridges as well as approach roads in the TTK section and the Kalewa-Yagyi section of the highway.¹⁸

¹⁵*Preparatory Study for North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project*. (2016). Japan International Cooperation Agency. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/social_environmental/id/asia/south/india/c8h0vm00009um3lwatt/c8h0ym0000bd9euo.pdf

¹⁶The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Its Possible Eastward Extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam: Challenges and Opportunities. (2020). In *Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia*. Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from <https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/2020-02-Trilateral-Highway-Report/Trilateral-Highway-Background-Papers.pdf>

¹⁷*Joint Statement by India and Myanmar on the State visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar*. (2012, May 28). [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/19893/Joint+Statement+by+India+and+Myanmar+on+the+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+India+to+Myanmar#:~:text=P.K.,all%20its%20forms%20and%20manifestations>

¹⁸*List of MoUs/Agreement signed during the visit of President of Myanmar to India*. (2016, August 29). Vivekananda International Foundation; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from <https://vifdatabase.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2016-Pres-visit-to-India.pdf>

In response to a query regarding the progress of the Trilateral Highway project in the Rajya Sabha on December 8, 2016, the then Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs, Gen. V.K. Singh, said that the Government of India had undertaken two projects; building a road connecting Kalewa and Yagyi section (approx. 120 KM), and building 69 bridges, which includes approach roads in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section (approx. 149 KM). The minister also informed the Rajya Sabha that the contractors had already mobilised men and equipment for construction, and he expressed hope that the work would be done by the end of 2021; though that is far from the reality even in 2024.¹⁹ The work on the other sections were awarded using the ‘Engineering, Procurement, and Construction’ (EPC) approach by May 2018. Though this pace of developments cannot be termed as ideal, but for a democratic state like India, where consensus building among the stakeholders often takes time, this is not bad either.

A two-lane highway is being built in the Kalewa-Yagyi segment, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) informed in a press release in January 2019. It also stated that Punj Lloyd and Varaha Infra joint venture received the letter of award for this project in January 2018 from the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI). The Ministry of External Affairs was funding the estimated INR 1460 crore in construction costs for the 122 KM road, which broke ground on May 28, 2018, and was anticipated to be finished by 2022.²⁰ Due to several factors, the construction is yet to be completed though. With regard to funds, the Indian Parliament was informed that INR 1830.87 crore had been sanctioned for the IMTT Highway project, out of which INR 193.16 crore was already released in January 2019. The then state minister of Ministry of Road Transport (MoRTH), Mansukh L. Mandaviya told the

¹⁹Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2018, December 20). *QUESTION NO.1127 STATUS OF TRILATERAL HIGHWAY PROJECT* [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from [https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/30799/quEsti#:~:text=What's%20New-.QUESTION%20NO.STATUS%20OF%20TRILATERAL%20HIGHWAY%20PROJECT&text=India%20is%20undertaking%20two%20sections.TKK\)%20road%20section%20in%20Myanmar](https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/30799/quEsti#:~:text=What's%20New-.QUESTION%20NO.STATUS%20OF%20TRILATERAL%20HIGHWAY%20PROJECT&text=India%20is%20undertaking%20two%20sections.TKK)%20road%20section%20in%20Myanmar)

²⁰Ministry of Road Transport & Highways. (2019, January 3). *India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway* [Press release]. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=187130>

Lok Sabha that INR 188.32 crore were released on account of the Kalewa-Yagyi road section and INR 4.84 crore for the 69 bridges and approach roads along the highway.²¹ These statements not only provide for figures related to funds but also show the commitment of New Delhi to the project.

In a letter, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar responded to a query from Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) MP Birendra Prasad Baishya in the Rajya Sabha on September 23, 2020, regarding the IMTT Highway's status. He informed the MP that one of the most difficult sections of the Trilateral Highway was the Kalewa-Yagyi stretch; and added, work on the road was continuing, with around 25% of the structure finished by the time of his reply. The progress of the 69 bridges, along with their approach roads, in the TTK section was delayed following the termination of the contractor in December 2018 due to poor execution. The Manipur High Court sustained the termination and rejected the contractor's appeal in August 2020. This fiasco with the contractor made the process delayed for a while. Following the High Court's ruling, construction of the first bridge connecting Moreh and Tamu in Myanmar was anticipated to commence very shortly, the minister said. According to Mr. Jaishankar, the remaining 68 bridges will be addressed one-by-one once the technical and cost parameters have been revised.²² This is just one piece of evidence how the highway project is facing unforeseen delays. It got fresh impetus after the pandemic, since 2023 though, however the political and security situation in Myanmar poses serious questions about its timely completion.

The IMTT Highway project was discussed, with a focus on accelerating it, during a meeting between Indian EAM S. Jaishankar and his Myanmar counterpart U Than Swe on July 16, 2023

²¹Press Trust of India. (2019, January 3). Govt releases Rs 193.16 cr fund for India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project. *www.business-standard.com*. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-releases-rs-193-16-cr-fund-for-india-myanmar-thailand-highway-project-119010300502_1.html

²²Anand, M. (2020, October 6). Steps on to complete India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highways. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/061020/steps-on-to-complete-india-myanmar-thailand-trilateral-highways.html>

in Bangkok, on the fringes of the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) ministerial meeting. Before the meeting, on a different platform, the Indian minister described the highway project as ‘very difficult’ but ‘extremely important’ keeping the present roadblocks and future promises in mind. Around this time, New Delhi had already pitched for the extension of the highway to Vietnam; but execution of the first part over Myanmar became difficult as a result of the political instability there. In fact, the unfolding situation in Myanmar had a direct repercussion on the bordering Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram as well; and that too came on the discussion, as reported by media after the meeting. In a statement after the meeting and also in a couple of tweets, Mr. Jaishankar voiced India’s commitment to a peaceful, stable Myanmar and expressed hope for completing the ongoing infrastructure projects inside Myanmar, be it the IMTT Highway or the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, in a time-bound manner. He stressed that these projects had the capacity to transform Myanmar itself and could be a harbinger of peace and stability that everyone was looking for.²³ The EAM’s reference to the internal benefits of Myanmar is a point to note here. The IMTT Highway has encountered numerous obstacles and setbacks since its conceptualisation in 2002, including financial difficulties, and from time to time, political unrest in Myanmar. Though its operationalisation has not progressed as planned, there has been some real progress in recent years, with a number of the highway’s sections being finished or almost on the verge of finishing. The project’s goal was to open the vital economic and strategic link by 2015; however, it got delayed and 2019 was fixed as the new timeline, though that could not be attained either. The new deadline, as of right now, is 2027. Connecting Kolkata

²³Press Trust of India. (2023, July 16). EAM Jaishankar meets Myanmar, Thailand counterparts; discusses India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/eam-jaishankar-meets-myanmar-thailand-counterparts-discusses-india-myanmar-thailand-trilateral-highway-1237415.html>

to Bangkok by road is undoubtedly a difficult task, considering the geopolitical environment and topographical challenges; still, whatever progress has been made so far is promising.

In a recent interview, Vijavat Isarabhakdi, Thailand's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that the majority of the project's work in Thailand is completed. About 70% of the work is finished, according to the Indian counterpart as well. On the other hand, Myanmar's Trade Minister Aung Naing Oo stated that the majority of the 1,512 KM roads were under construction, and expressed hope that the remaining portions would be finished by the contractors in the next three years. Although it has seen significant growth recently, there are still many areas in which the IMTT Highway project's essential roadways in Myanmar have to be improved. The second Friendship Bridge, which connects Myawaddy and Mae Sot, and the bypass road that connects Myawaddy and Kawkaik in Thailand are two of the many portions of the initially constructed IMTTH alignments that have been finished or rebuilt. Furthermore, ongoing initiatives include the establishment of an arterial road that connects Bago and Kyaikto in Myanmar, which is being supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the construction of a new bridge in Bago, which is being supported by Japan, and the enhancement and restoration of roadways between Kalewa and Monywa.

Myanmar is yet to find a political solution to the ongoing fighting between the Tatmadaw and the united opposition rebel forces which is raging throughout Chin State as well as Sagaing Region, where most of the work is being done or due. It appears unlikely that contractors will pick up where they left off if the situation worsens. Negotiating the IMT Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement (IMT-TMVA) is another issue that requires urgent attention. Even though the Indian government had organised the IMTTH Friendship Car Rally in 2016 to raise awareness among the stakeholders about the possible advantages of a MVA among the three nations, not much has really happened since then. There are a number of factors behind this, most importantly the very poor condition of roads and limited connectivity inside Myanmar

which is to work as the hinge for this project to succeed. Plus, frequently changing security situation in Myanmar is not very encouraging to start shipment of cargo between India and ASEAN states using its roads. In addition to that, different driving regulations are a major point of concern. India and Thailand have right hand drive (RHD) cars that run along the left side of the road, whereas Myanmar has right lane driving regime, though, surprisingly, most of the vehicles plying on its roads are RHD!

7.3.2 Challenges Ahead

At present, India is particularly focusing on resuming the speed of India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project after a period of halt due to political instability and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. India shares a long but complicated boundary with Myanmar which separates a host of ethnic groups, living on both sides of the international borders. The presence of several ethnic conflicts in Myanmar and India's north-east region has posed obstacles to the successful implementation of the trilateral highway project. The recent communal conflict between the Kuki and Meitei peoples in Manipur, and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar have adversely impacted the project to a significant level. The military Junta in Naypyidaw cannot achieve the stability and long-term development they desire without resolving the ethnic conflicts that have persisted for over seven decades, and addressing the consequences of the 2021 coup and the subsequent Spring Revolution. Maintaining good relationships with neighbouring countries like India alone do not seem enough for the goal of modernising northern Myanmar; and by doing that pacify age-old ethnic divisions.

India's approach to Myanmar has been influenced by pragmatism since the 1990s, and following the military coup in 2021, it has not changed. New Delhi has provided military equipment, including arms, and supported the Junta through various economic projects.

Furthermore, India opened a so-called ‘Track 1.5 Dialogue’ with Myanmar, aiming to facilitate constructive engagement, but it allegedly did not include representation from the opposition. In December 2022, India, along with Russia and China, abstained from voting on a United Nations Security Council resolution that urged for a cessation of arms supply to the Myanmar military. These actions clearly show New Delhi’s somewhat desperation in keeping the Junta in favour to proceed with its ongoing infrastructure projects, including the IMTT Highway. Observers argue that India cannot actually ‘act east’ without support from Naypyidaw; and, this urge for alignment discounting the calls of moral obligations can be seen in this respect.²⁴

The political and security situation in Myanmar is of significant concern for the IMTT Highway project. Chin State, Sagaing Region, Magway Region, and Karen State are currently the stages of fierce battle between the Junta, and various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs). These are also the places through which the IMTT Highway passes and quite a large amount of work is still underway there. Reports surfaced, first in November 2022, regarding attacks carried out by the PDF troops targeting passenger and cargo vehicles and causing disruptions to transport routes; and the frequency of such attacks has only increased in 2023. These incidents have raised concerns regarding the safety of contractors, workers, and drivers involved in the construction of the highway, as well as the safety of passengers utilising the already laid sections. The project's completion appears very unlikely if the political situation in Myanmar remains this volatile and New Delhi does not open a channel of communication with the opposition forces.

The recent flare-up in Manipur only further complicated the whole scenario; as Meiteis, Kukis, Mizos, and Nagas have different outlook towards Myanmar and New Delhi’s one action can

²⁴Lian, T. T. (2023, September 19). The Indian Trilateral Highway Project and Myanmar’s Spring Revolution. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-indian-trilateral-highway-project-and-myanmars-spring-revolution/>

elicit quite diverse reactions from them.²⁵ There is another problem with regard to the attitude of the Junta, a significant factor contributing to the delay, as has been identified by Prabir De, an eminent observer of this region. The Myanmar government initially welcomed the highway project quite warmly, particularly during the tenure of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, but the former Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government as well. Naypyidaw received sizable development aid along with technical assistance in highway construction from New Delhi. However, the military generals of the Junta soon realised that Myanmar had limited growth potential with regard to export to India or Thailand in near future, and that sucked out a lot of steam from their initial enthusiasm. They looked at the highway as a link between Delhi and Bangkok, where their role would be largely of a facilitator earning some revenues from transit. This type of narrow understanding and a lack of vision of its potential spill-over effects on the Myanmar economy had led them to pass on the responsibility to New Delhi. The slowing down of progress post-2021 coup is very apparent, notwithstanding the political instability in northern Myanmar.²⁶

7.4 Conclusion

Apart from the IMTT Highway, India is heavily invested in Myanmar in projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), and these multiple pushes for infrastructure development should not be seen exclusively of each other. Current political conflict in Myanmar has the possibility to derail every one of them as a large part of Myanmar is now reported to be under control of the opposition forces. The rebel fighters claim that they would have by now taken control of the whole country had the Myanmar Air Force not been

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Padmanabhan, K., & Krishnankutty, P. (2024, April 4). India-Myanmar-Thailand highway — final piece of the puzzle in New Delhi's Atlantic to Pacific push. *ThePrint*. <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-myanmar-thailand-highway-final-piece-of-the-puzzle-in-new-delhis-atlantic-to-pacific-push/2027359/>

there, allegedly indiscriminately bombing civilian targets to spread fear. They also claim the government is now confined to the cities of Yangon and Mandalay only; the rest of the land is either in their control or they are in advance there. It is quite difficult to verify such claims as the country is almost completely cut off from the world, but some widely recognised media houses have, at least partially, endorsed it.

In any case, this does not put India in a comfortable position which until late had backed the Junta and shied away from opening channels of communication with the so-called government in exile, anticipating the Junta's ability to hold on to power. In January last, Paletwa town, on the Kaladan river and connecting Sittwe to Zorinpui, an extremely important hinge in the KMTTP fell under the Arakan Army, one of the main factions of the rebelling opposition forces. This incident alarmed New Delhi. It sent a delegation under the MNF Rajya Sabha MP K. Vanlalvena at the end of February last, to visit inside the rebel-held territory and to check on the real condition of the Indian projects, as reported by The Hindu on March 1, 2024; a first of its kind open move by New Delhi since the outbreak of the civil war in 2021. What the delegation is reported to have found is only stretches of mud which were once standard roads upgraded by India as part of the said projects. Naturally, it does not require much effort to imagine what is happening further deep inside Myanmar.

Situation is not as bad with regard to the BBIN; but recent political developments inside the neighbours raise some serious concerns about this too. The returning of K.P. Sharma Oli to power in Nepal, who had previously openly favoured China over India; and anti-India slogans in the movement against reservation in Bangladesh are pointing towards the future path of India's engagement that might be full of thorns. Connectivity is the prime focus of BBIN grouping, but so much negative public sentiment in Bangladesh in June last (2024) over the transit rights of Indian freights moving through it raises questions as to whether the two governments will be able to realise those on the grounds. India has always remained a political

plank in elections in its neighbouring countries, and in the previous chapters we have noted how anti-India sentiments are encashed for electoral benefits, be it Nepal or the Maldives. In such a backdrop, after a decade of forward moves, the sub-regional platforms seem to be in shambles right now.

India cannot control what will happen on its periphery; at the most, it can extend hands for cooperation to whatever regimes coming to the saddle in the neighbouring capitals. At the large-scale platforms it did not work, like under SAARC. As these sub-regional initiatives are devoid of Indo-Pak tensions, these hold better promises to work, if not now, in some future when a favourable environment emerges. As the BBIN and the IMTT Highway are informal associations, momentary setbacks are less damaging than the region-level efforts. Financial commitments are a thing of real concern though, as millions of dollars wasted in infrastructure projects are not something easy to swallow; but, there is hardly any other way, as it seems now, to move forward either.

Conclusion to the thesis

This research has aimed to look into two things, India's engagement with the neighbours and the role of sub-regional architectures in its neighbourhood policy. For the purpose of the research to be focused, a hypothesis was developed in the beginning, which essentially states sub-regional architectures can work as an alternative, or complementary, to regional cooperation mechanism in India's neighbourhood policy, provided they do away with overlap in their membership and mandate. In addition to that, a step by step approach, starting with the smaller ones like BBIN and moving on to the larger ones like the BIMSTEC probably would have been beneficial in place of diving into all of them at once. As we have come to the end of the thesis, it is now time to test the hypothesis, which we have broken down to four research questions for the purpose of convenience in approaching each of the issues of the hypothesis in a systematic manner. The research questions, thus developed, largely come down to the following:

1. How does India stand in South Asia?
2. How are India's bilateral ties with the neighbours?
3. Why did multilateral engagement under SAARC not succeed?
4. What is India's position with regard to sub-regional architectures?

In the consecutive seven chapters, after explaining the logic, scope, purpose and method of the research in the introduction, we have been able to develop an understanding on the matter. Answering the above questions is only part of testing the hypothesis; and we will try to reach a conclusion to the study by answering them one by one.

How does India stand in South Asia?

India is considered to be the dominant power in South Asia; and multiple factors contribute to India's regional dominance. As we have discussed in Chapter 1, India is the largest country in South Asia in terms of land area, occupying 64% of the landmass, and population, with over 1.4 billion people, accounting for 74% of the region. India's large size and proportion provide it with inherent advantages in terms of economic and military capabilities, as well as diplomatic influence. India has the largest economy in South Asia, accounting for approximately three quarters of the region's total economic activities. The country has a wide array of conventional and modern military capabilities, such as a nuclear arsenal, a large standing army, an advanced missile defence system, and latest drone surveillance and cyber warfare capabilities. In addition to that, India possesses the world's largest standing paramilitary forces, which come pretty close to the military in terms of training and arsenal.

India has a significant political influence in South Asia, therefore, due to its size, population, economic might, and highly developed military apparatus. Consequently, it has a substantial sway on regional organisations like the SAARC, and can influence regional policies and priorities. Apart from physical and military superiority, India's political influence is also strengthened by its democratic values and system, and its leadership role in the non-aligned movement. India's long-standing democratic traditions, characterised by peaceful transitions of power, provide the country with a higher moral platform in asserting its leadership claims and earning the trust of the international community. Moreover, the unique geography of the region places it in the heart of South Asia; and in the course, offers New Delhi with a strong strategic leverage. India shares borders with all six countries in the region, while none of them share borders with each other. This key feature allows India to exert more influence than most of the other global and regional powers

in their respective neighbourhoods. India's dominance in the South Asian region is further reinforced by its control over the Indian Ocean and international sea trade routes.

The centrality and dominant position of India are perceived by its neighbours in various ways though; ranging from a dependable neighbour to a hegemon seeking to establish a sphere of influence at the expense of others. While at times they acknowledge India's leadership and regional contributions, often they express concerns about India's intentions, fearing potential interference in their internal affairs and infringement on their sovereignty. In any case, the centrality of India does not come without challenges. The long-standing disputes over international borders, frequent eruption of political violence in different forms, or the erratic behaviour of nature as a result of climate change, are some of the difficult challenges that India faces in its neighbourhood. In the last couple of decades, the addition of the China factor has complicated this situation further. An era of competitive engagement marked by investment in infrastructure has been seen in South Asian theatre. Quite often, the smaller neighbours now try to exact their terms on India's involvement by playing the China card.

In spite of having an edge over the neighbours in terms of almost every aspect, thus, India's position in South Asia does not reflect that of a comfort zone. Surely it enjoys a sway over China due to its socio-cultural affinity with all the six South Asian neighbours; India still needs to walk the extra mile to maintain its standing of the times until the 1980s. New Delhi has been exploring alternative routes of engagement since the 1990s as bilateralism has proven inadequate, and multilateralism in the framework of SAARC has practically failed.

How is India's bilateral ties with the neighbours?

India's bilateral ties with the neighbours is primarily conditioned by four factors; first, colonial legacy, second, border disputes arising out of that legacy, third, partition, and, fourth, its asymmetric size with regard to the neighbours. As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, other than Nepal and Bhutan, all South Asian states were under British control for nearly two centuries, having a more or less common administrative and political setup. Though Nepal, Bhutan, and the then monarchical Sikkim were not under direct control, officially—in truth, they too were 'guided' by British India in world affairs. This colonial reality has left an enduring legacy in the form of border disputes which still haunt South Asian landscape, especially India, as it shares borders with all of them. On the west, there is the disputed land boundary of Kashmir, where *de jure* and *de facto* borders are quite different, and the concerned parties, India and Pakistan, have been in a conflict mode with it since independence. On the north, Nepal only grudgingly accepts India's claims on certain areas, especially the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh tri-junction; while, India's disagreement with China with regard to Aksai Chin in the western sector and Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector, has the record of periodic escalations, including a border war in 1962. On the east, the border demarcation with Bangladesh had been completed in 2015 with the conclusion of the Land Boundary Agreement after almost 40 years' tedious negotiations; meanwhile, the border remains porous and hot with Myanmar. With two maritime neighbours on the south, the situation is rather normal these days, as with regard to their water boundaries and respective EEZs, India had been able to come to the same page with Sri Lanka and the Maldives during the 1980s. Only with Bhutan, India does not have any border issues; and, due to the *de facto* status of the Line of Control in Kashmir, its geographical contiguity with Afghanistan has been cut since 1947 only.

These border disputes have led India to five major wars since the British left the theatre; four with Pakistan, in 1947-48, 1965, 1971, and 1999, and one with China in 1962. Apart from these, escalations and exchange of fire along the frontiers are quite routine affairs, sometimes leading to significant casualties. The Chinese are not ready to adhere to the pacts and treaties that the British had concluded with their former monarchical regimes, and aggressively lay claims on their 'lost land' around its borders; not only with India, but with other neighbours also, making large tracts of South and Southeast Asia contested since the 1950s. Beijing's annexation of Tibet and some parts of Ladakh during the early 1950s and the 1960s respectively, alarmed the nations lying on its borders, including India. On the other hand, India's annexation of Goa in 1961 and Sikkim in 1975, and its instrumental role in creating Bangladesh out of East Pakistan, also had repercussions in the neighbouring capitals. Moreover, these changes in cartography in such quick successions during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s only mark the fluidic nature of boundaries in South Asia. In fact, every state situated in this landscape, is not satisfied with the boundaries they have; be it the largest, India or the tiniest, Maldives. The British colonial administration had drawn these borders keeping their strategic interests in mind, but the expansive nature of World War II and their hasty exit after the war, left everything half-baked; opening innumerable possibilities of future conflicts which the newly independent states had to share the burden of. India being the largest, the highest burden fell on it.

What made the already chaotic South Asian theatre with an imminent British exit further volatile was the partition. We have discussed this curse of partition and its long-term effects in Chapter 1 in detail, and had some more references in Chapter 2 as well. It is essentially a political division marked by extreme religious connotation leading to violence to the level of massacre in some places, leaving its psychological scars for generations. Pakistan was created by the partition of

British India, but it was not satisfied with its map. Without capable leaders, after the demise of Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, its commitment to democracy and secularism faltered, and soon the nation-building exercise got into the hands of the armed forces. A radar-less Pakistan had nothing but Islam and India-psychosis to bind it together. In this context come the fourth factor, India's disproportionate size and influence in the South Asian landscape. This asymmetry in India's favour was further reinforced by the secession of East Pakistan and coming of Bangladesh with Indian help. Despite being a military and political victory for New Delhi, it sent perceptibly erroneous signals to other neighbouring capitals about its intentions.

During the 1950s, India's neighbourhood policy was largely based on high ideals like world peace, third world cooperation on development etc., guided by Nehru. The 1962 border war with China changed this path, and New Delhi gradually walked towards pragmatism after Nehru. After winning the 1965 war with Pakistan, during the 1970s India bolstered its position by a series of successes, starting from the 1971 war with Pakistan to nuclear tests in 1974 and annexation of Sikkim in 1975; while having its security covered under the Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. Naturally, bilateralism had appeared to be India's favourite choice in engaging the neighbours as no other state in South Asia was able to match its clout. This policy continued till the mid-1990s, though India became a founding member of the regional grouping SAARC in 1985. Keeping the four above-mentioned determining factors in mind, India's bilateral ties with the neighbours, since the 1960s, can be best described as 'enthusiastic' in keeping good relations but far from 'going overboard with idealism' like it did in the previous decade. One must remember, though, that India has consistently maintained bilateral relations with every state in its neighbourhood, weathering the ups and down from time to time.

Notwithstanding the Kashmir issue, four wars, and a long-drawn proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan, New Delhi has seen some moments of ups with Islamabad as well. The Indus Water Sharing Treaty is probably the biggest success in engagement between the two hostile neighbours; but over time, they have cooperated in some other areas too, especially in humanitarian issues involving natural calamities. It has also been observed that whenever democracy thrives in Pakistan, for whatever little duration that might be, the Indo-Pak bilateral relations tend to improve. In recent times, more than conventional security concerns, domestic politics has evidently emerged as the main obstacle in nurturing a workable, if not friendly, relations as we have noted in Chapter 2; as in both the states, principal political parties are using the other state as election plank and in the way spreading hatred among the masses.

Pakistan remains an important factor in Indo-Afghan relations too. India's bonhomie with Afghanistan had come to a sudden halt in August, 2021, with the Taliban's rise to power once again. Since 2003, India had remained deeply engaged in the Afghan reconstruction drive and committed more than USD 3 billion to that effort. It looked ostensible from 2016 that any future Afghan power sharing formula would have to take the Taliban into its fold; though their remarkably fast and decisive campaign to capture Kabul probably came as a surprise to New Delhi. Unlike the last time in 1996, India has so far shown some flexibility in its approach to the regime this time. It has not recognised the regime yet, and its diplomatic missions officially remain shut; nonetheless, it has started talking to the Taliban representatives in various third-party initiatives or on foreign soil. India has also sent a considerable amount of relief in terms of food and medicine to Afghanistan in the last two years, which the Taliban administration has openly appreciated. Therefore, as Chapter 4 suggests, it is yet to be seen what direction this relation takes in the future in the backdrop unfolding situation in Kabul.

In the case of Bangladesh, on the other hand, India's engagement had become quite conditional on Awami League's stay in power. This has been exposed after the recent student revolt that has toppled Hasina government there. In the last fifteen years, under Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka, the bilateral ties had improved to a significant extent. The mutual benefits of engaging in bilateral and multilateral infrastructure investments, together with India's long-time demand of a passage through Bangladesh to its north-eastern provinces were acknowledged and gained traction. India's role in the Bangladeshi liberation movement and the organically connected nature of Bengali nation on both sides of the borders provide this relationship a special status. One must not forget, though, that all constituencies within Bangladesh do not hold such a positive view about India, and in such a context, New Delhi's almost sole dependence on Awami League was bound to offset this special position in some future. Moreover, some recurrent issues needed immediate attention and requisite action, such as sharing of water of international rivers, effective and humane management of borders, and huge trade balance in India's favour. If these issues can now be resolved with the new, emerging political set up in Dhaka, New Delhi can expect a relatively calm eastern frontier.

Myanmar, the other eastern neighbour, also holds the potential of becoming an important strategic partner, as we have shown in Chapter 4. India has been consistently maintaining good relations with the ruling Junta, especially since the early 1990s; while at the same time, it has lent its voice for democracy as well. As a result, it could sail through the brief democratic interlude of the last decade in Myanmar quite successfully. India is now heavily invested Myanmar, as it perceives the latter to be the gateway to the Southeast Asian markets as well as the ASEAN strategic community. The current political turbulence there is a serious challenge for India's east-ward drive and also for the projects that it has been involved in.

In Nepal, during the last two decades, India is struggling to maintain the influence it has historically yielded. Nepal's politics has undergone few paradigm shifts since the 1990s. The ruling communists, though they are fragmented into many parties now, have shown preference towards China; at least, to counterbalance India's overwhelming influence there. Moreover, there is a pattern in anti-India sentiments in some quarters of Nepal, especially the youth, which can probably be linked to China. New Delhi's failure to nurture and strengthen more constituencies other than the Nepali Congress and the army veterans has made this reality crop up after the civil war. We have noted in Chapter 3 that, owing to its unique location and without a diversified economy, Nepal is not in a position to replace India with China; but, at the same time, it needs to be noted that Indian engagement has become quite costlier due to this China factor. Mishandling of situations like that of the constitution making or the Madheshi agitation, have only worsened India's prospect of having a peaceful Nepal with less diplomatic and financial pledge.

Bhutan, on the other hand, has remained a friend spanning decades while the international political stage had gone through major changes. New Delhi handled Bhutan's transition to democracy quite delicately and successfully; coinciding with it came the revision of the Friendship Treaty, espousing the new realities of the time. In fact, India could emulate the management of Bhutan's transition in case of Nepal too, which had gone south as a result of, if not solely because of, New Delhi's high-handedness. India has concerns about Bhutan too, but it comes more from the Chinese interests and activities along the northern borders than Thimphu itself. So far, the two parties' concerns and interests have aligned vis-à-vis an ostensible motive of Beijing to alter the character of some of the unguarded and disputed high mountain borders where three nations meet. In recent times, Bhutan's reluctance to join the BBIN MVA has come up as a stumbling block in New

Delhi's effort to connect these four BBIN states by physical infrastructure together with seamless movement of vehicles and people.

India's engagement with Sri Lanka has also passed through some rough waters in the last couple of decades; when the ruling coalition led by Rajapaksa family had shown a clear tilt towards Beijing. There were several reasons for them to do it, most notably having an economic powerhouse by their side which would not care about checking their human rights credentials every other day, and also support them in international forums. Though with some initial strides in reconstruction of the post-war nation, Colombo ultimately fell into a Chinese debt trap, and eventually declared bankruptcy in 2022. This led to the ouster of the Rajapaksas, and India emerged as one of the most important states with regard to debt restructuring efforts along with some immediate relief measures to keep the island nation going. The history of the 1980s are fading away with new generations of politicians coming over on both sides; and, the present times offer an excellent opportunity for New Delhi to reshape its ties with Colombo, especially keeping their mutual interests on the Indian Ocean in mind.

The other island neighbour, the Maldives is currently posing some serious challenges to India's long-term objectives in the Indian Ocean Region. The Muizzu administration which has come to power on the back of a strong-pitched 'India Out' campaign is now doing everything to make their position firm on the saddle. Maldivian politics has always remained highly personality-centric, and a change in face on the chair frequently brings along a change in policy as well. Therefore, it's time for New Delhi to accept the setback and cautiously watch over a retreat from Male, while remaining alert of any further Chinese inroads into the country.

Though we have had passing references only, the number of such references show the importance of China in India's bilateral ties with the neighbours. China is also a neighbour indeed, but its

inclusion in the current discussion has been consciously side-stepped; firstly because, that goes beyond the scope of this research, and secondly, a discussion on India-China relations probably demands a thesis in itself, making it practical, in our case, to keep it at a contextual level only.

Why did multilateral engagement under SAARC not succeed?

A regional cooperation initiative starts when a bunch of states agree to work on some specific fields to meet some particular challenges which are otherwise impossible for them to individually take on. For states of South Asia, there exists a host of such common challenges, for instance poverty, malnutrition, low literacy rates, shortage of capital and technology for industrial development and the resultant unemployment, wrath of climate change, and so on. This means there is an abundance of scope to cooperate. Nevertheless, to cooperate, they first need to focus on, and shift some of their political energy and resources to a central organisation which can work as the collective instrument for addressing common challenges. That's where SAARC comes into the picture. For a platform like SAARC to succeed, the members need to acknowledge common regional priorities, sacrificing some of their own individual priorities sometimes; and they also need to let go some amount of their sovereignty for the larger body to perform. This is where the SAARC members have faltered. In case of some successful regional cooperation mechanisms, fear of a common enemy has worked as the necessary glue. However, in the case of SAARC, that is not only absent but on the contrary, its member-states look up to different extra-regional powers for economic development, security, and to balance Indian influence; which makes them uncomfortable to sit together and work on regional issues. In fact, such common regional priorities sometimes go against the interest of the outside patron states, and they make their clients roadblock any initiative in that path. SAARC has tried to bypass any such contentious moves from the very

beginning, and focused on the sectors that are mostly non-political, non-controversial in nature; yet that has not led it to extend the cooperation initiatives to more complicated ones over time, as has been the case with other regional forums starting around same time.

The political landscape of South Asia is quite profoundly characterised by long-drawn conflicts among the constituent states, and their regional policy postures are largely determined by security concerns. The conflicts have their roots in history, which is now virtually irreversible; however, its present solutions or forms are not happily accepted by these states either. The conflict between India and Pakistan, along with their vast military capabilities coupled with nuclear arsenal, has made the region one of the most militarised zones across the world. The increasing interest and presence of an extra-regional power like China in the regional equation, which also acts as the patron state for Pakistan, only complicates the situation more. These three neighbours have fought five wars, and their borders are almost always on high alerts. None of these facts serves well for the working of a regional organisation, nor did it for SAARC. In addition to state rivalries, there are a number of non-state actors in the form of ethnic, religious or some other ultra-nationalist or separatist movements, often backed by a neighbouring state, which make the security scenario of the region highly volatile and susceptible to rapid escalation. The lasting insurgency movements in Indian Kashmir and north-east India, Baloch and Pashtun national movements in Pakistan, ethnic divide in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, religious extremist elements in Bangladesh and Maldives, all bear testament to this fact.

Apart from history, the map of South Asia, which is a creation of history itself, poses some challenges to regional collaborative efforts. The states of the region widely vary in terms of their size, population, level of socio-economic development or international standing; and to add to it, also in their style of governance. Such differences in physicality, socio-political ethos along with

structural asymmetries make mutual understanding quite difficult, even on mutually beneficial issues like trade and connectivity. The borders among this set of heterogeneous states are mostly artificial, a colonial handiwork, as we have seen previously; and, this makes those highly porous. As a result, there is a propensity of one nation's internal chaos having spill-over effects onto another. Though SAARC has endured this kind of constant flux in the political environment for the last four decades, as we have noted in Chapter 5, it is not equipped well enough to keep working towards its mandate overcoming such obstacles. Intervention of extra-regional powers, sometimes, has only made the situation worse.

Regional cooperation initiatives are generally conceptualised and start with one major power, or a couple of them, which do the heavy lifting for initial trust building. In the case of the EU's predecessor, the European Coal and Steel Community, Germany and France took the first step forward, in the face of a possible encirclement by the Soviet Union. For NAFTA to work, all three major economies in North America, Canada, Mexico and the US—banded themselves together. For AEAN, which is highly asymmetric like that of SAARC, five disparate states came together. In South Asian context, India and Pakistan were supposed to do the same considering their size compared to others; but, both were sceptical about such a grouping in the beginning. India apprehended that the group might stitch the smaller neighbours together for extracting concessions from it, whereas, Pakistan suspected it as an Indian ploy to corner it in regional politics, playing patron to the smaller states. As a result, SAARC could not start on a strong foot.

Moreover, regional identity formation is another aspect for a regional grouping to become truly functional. Though South Asian states are very closely and intricately connected to each other's neighbours in terms of social, cultural, linguistic and civilisational bonds; surprisingly, they detested forming any larger regional identity by compromising some of their own typical features.

Rather on the contrary, national and sub-national identities have remained an instrument of assertion in securing their share of power and resources in these newly decolonised states. All these factors crippled SAARC from its inception, as we have shown in Chapter 5, and the association has further lost its momentum in last one decade due to differences between India and Pakistan with regard to a bunch of issues of regional interest, and India's consequent shifting of focus to the east on the back of a host of sub-regional groupings like the BIMSTEC, the BBIN, the MGC, and the IORA.

What is India's position with regard to sub-regional architectures?

Sub-regional partnerships have become one of the significant pillars in India's multilateral approach to world affairs, particularly in the geopolitically volatile regions of South and Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding being a part of the regional grouping of SAARC, the BIMSTEC, the BBIN, the IMTT Highway, the MGC or the IORA initiatives stand out in India's neighbourhood policy; not only because of their more recent establishments, but also due to their enormous potential to impact on national security and development issues within India's vicinity. As we have already seen, having been acknowledged as a regional powerhouse and an aspiring global power, New Delhi is currently faced with some difficult strategic choices which may decide the course of India's future standing in international politics. Not only in its South Asian neighbourhood, India has emerged as a significant actor in the greater Asia-Pacific strategic theatre in general; but this rise in stature is seemingly conditioned by its relative influence vis-à-vis China. Interestingly, some analysts argue that this high-stakes game of competitive influence with the bigger, northern neighbour also brings a multitude of opportunities in the long run. Coming together with states which share a convergence in strategic interests in the face of an assertive China can help attain

other important developmental goals as well. In this context, the sub-regional architectures have cropped up in India's neighbourhood as well as in larger foreign policy dynamics.

The limitations of SAARC have indeed gradually conceded space to more prospective lower-level projects, such as the BIMSTEC or the BBIN grouping, which prioritise limited, sector-driven collaboration only. Multiplication of such sub-regional arrangements has now become a source of dilemma though, particularly in maintaining policy cohesion in an ever-changing Asian strategic landscape. Besides these two, there are a host of other initiatives working at the sub-regional level with their own focal points and members, which more often than not overlap, as we have observed in Chapters 6 and 7. These groupings enjoy, unlike SAARC, less bureaucratic red tapes and agility in operations; nevertheless, the intricate pattern of their mandate and membership has made the whole process somewhat airy-fairy. Goals like economic integration on the back of enhanced, modern connectivity are common to almost all of these initiatives, making the goal itself less achievable as a result of shifting operational commitments. Another aspect of this overlap, coupled with a lack of coordination among these groups, results in duplication of efforts. The states involved in these groups are not rich with abundant economic resources to invest in so many projects at a single point in time; and as a consequence, such effort duplication causes fund crunch, thereby putting the whole cooperation network in disarray. Also, common goals but divergent approaches in these initiatives often result in difficulty in implementation and sometimes generate unwanted reaction from the stakeholders.

For instance, India engages with the neighbours at three levels; at the bilateral, at regional/ sub-regional, and at international levels. New Delhi has seen an ocean of opportunity in the Indian Ocean since the early 1990s. To reap its locational advantage on the Ocean, it has been engaging with relevant actors since then. At the bilateral level and in the Bay of Bengal region, it has strong

connections with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, while making new ones with Myanmar. India's port-led development agenda, currently under the fold of the unofficial regime of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), primarily serves the twin purpose of enhancing trade with the maritime neighbours and keeping Chinese influence in check among these nations. Again, all these states, except for Myanmar, are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) which aims to safeguard free shipping rights of all nations along the international sea lanes passing through the Indian Ocean. The timing of emergence of the IORA and its later enlargement and reshaping cannot just be a coincidence, keeping the claims on oceans of an aggressive China starting around the same time in mind. In between SAGAR and IORA, we can imagine the BIMSTEC, which stretches beyond the maritime objectives though, but only to reaffirm it. The crucial thing in solving the issue of overlap in the sub-regional architectures is to streamline these efforts, and make better use of available resources.

Let us consider another example, in a different field, road connectivity. India, Myanmar and Thailand started exploring the possibility of direct and seamless road traffic in 2002, only to give it a formal shape in 2012, under the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral (IMTT) Highway; connecting Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand, through Myanmar. This ambitious project is on, though missing several deadlines and currently having its future hanging on Myanmar's ongoing civil war. India has another ambitious venture in Myanmar in the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport (KMTT) Project, which aims to connect India's land-locked and poorly linked north-eastern provinces with the Sittwe Port in Rakhine province, thus opening an alternative path to these provinces than the so-called chicken's neck on the Siliguri Corridor. Amidst indefinite delays and postponement of various sub-components of the overall project, Sittwe Port has finally been operationalised in 2023. What makes one wonder is about the connection between these two

projects, if there is any; both are passing through Myanmar and aim to enhance connectivity, but apparently progressing exclusively of each other. Moreover, the first is under the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) while for the second, the nodal office is Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This is not to suggest that it is the wrong way to go ahead with such projects, but whether having such disjointed efforts in the same direction is the most practical one, is a question to ponder on.

India started its experiment with sub-regional architectures with the formation of South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) in 1997; though the grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal later grew into the SASEC Program, under ADB auspices, and by including more members over time. The original four members of the group, under an informal structure, again erected a cooperation mechanism, which is now called the BBIN, corresponding to the first letters of their names. Since surfacing (or resurfacing one may say), during the middle of the last decade, this group has emphasised operationalisation of a Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) in tune with the SAARC MVA which was let down by Pakistan in the 2014 SAARC Summit in Kathmandu. Apart from the MVA, the informal group has also stressed on cooperation in the power sector, which has shown tremendous potential given its complementarity among the four members. The point is India has already had such agreements with Bhutan and Nepal at the bilateral level. Therefore, this group serves as the instrument of adding Bangladesh in the already existing somewhat tripartite cooperation structure in some fields, while making roads for free vehicular movements. Same is being done in a tripartite effort with Myanmar and Thailand, in the case of the IMTT Highway, as we have just discussed in the previous paragraph. Interestingly, all these seven states are members of the BIMSTEC. Naturally, the question arises, why such an effort has not been taken under the

BIMSTEC? Only Sri Lanka is left out of the eight BIMSTEC states in this arrangement, but it is an island nation anyway.

A similar situation can be found in the case of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation as well. Among the seven thrust areas of the BIMSTEC, two are common with the MGC. BIMSTEC, being a much larger group with a bigger mandate, as it looks, has the capacity to build cooperation on those two areas very well; as three members of the MGC, out of six are also part of the BIMSTEC. In fact, in such a way an efficient and active BIMSTEC can make a handful of sub-regional initiatives redundant, saving cost and efforts involved but producing more tangible results. Initially, the BIMSTEC was seen as India's response to a paralysed SAARC, which offered New Delhi the ways and means to bypass Pakistan in regional space, particularly with regard to regional cooperation, and also in curbing Chinese influence in the backyard. However, for reasons unknown, the platform has never received the push it deserves; and as a result, its achievements remain more questionable than that of SAARC, the one it was supposed to replace.

In the context discussed above, this research proposes that regional cooperation through a sequential approach, starting with initiatives like the BBIN and culminating into embracing bigger frameworks like the BIMSTEC, is more advantageous than a simultaneous pursuit of multiple sub-regional architectures. The benefits of prioritising sequence in this matter, using model examples of phased regional integration from elsewhere in the world, include lower initial investment of diplomatic effort and a lesser amount of financial commitment, along with drawing less attention from the outside communities which might not endorse such a development around it.

Several studies have pointed out how different parts of the world have used phased strategies for regional integration successfully in the past. The most prominent example is of course the European Union (EU) which started by focusing on economy through the European Coal and Steel

Community (ECSC), before eventually embracing other broader political and social issues. With the incremental approach, member-states were able to build confidence, set up institutional structures, and deal with immediate challenges before handling complex sovereignty and governance issues. From 6 countries in 1951 as members of the ECSC to 27 now as members of the EU, the story of European integration holds a significant cue with regard to membership pattern as well. Moreover, enhancing cooperation in a phased manner allows the sub-regional groupings to accommodate and adapt with changes in global and regional realities with more ease. This simplified approach enables better policy formulation, improved coordination and management, and efficient utilisation of resources, thereby enhancing the influence and efficacy of the regional cooperation initiative at large.

There are several factors in favour of the BBIN as a starting point for the sequential development of sub-regional mechanisms in and around South Asia. Firstly, it possesses the greatest potential for addressing common challenges and leveraging shared opportunities in comparison to other options. BBIN stands out as an effective platform due to its focus on leveraging existing economic, cultural, and logistical synergies among member countries. To add to it, the BBIN zone is physically linked and has deep historical connections. These nations are interconnected by more than just their boundaries; there are also cultural, economic and environmental interdependence among them, enhancing the need for joint efforts. Moreover, the BBIN sub-region shows complementary strengths that can be harnessed through enhanced integration, leading to economic benefits. The Indian economy serves as an anchor in this setting. The growing export sector in Bangladesh, Bhutan's hydropower resources, and Nepal's thriving tourism industry coupled with natural resources present enough prospects for an economic union in this part of South Asia. It has been historically noted that more homogeneous groupings are able to agree on projects faster and

see them through to completion. For India, integration within the BBIN would fulfil two significant immediate objectives in the form of security and economic growth.

Main criticism of India's neighbourhood policy has remained frequent loss of motivation and changing directions; which is probably due to its extremely scattered resource allocation to a multiplicity of sub-regional groupings that ultimately thins down the allotment to each one of them. Having committed to so many platforms hinders its operational agility as well. Therefore, a coordinated approach, preferably sequential in method, is urgently needed which can deliver on its promises in a time-bound manner. To achieve that, New Delhi must work to do away with the overlapping nature of the sub-regional associations it is engaged in, and also, it must stop any duplication in efforts. The restructured policy framework should prioritise regional initiatives on the basis of their potential impact and feasibility, by primarily focusing on initiatives like BBIN that have gone beyond rhetoric to actual implementation. This would give political and economic dividends soon and can be able to attract more nations to join these efforts. Therefore, prioritising the minimisation of duplications and fostering intra-regional collaborations would allow India to effectively utilise its resources, strengthen regional dominance, and achieve substantial gains in security and development. In addition to that, it can give further push to its already existing programmes of capacity building in neighbouring states strengthening future partnerships by creating multiple constituencies inside them.

As India continues to navigate through the maze of its neighbourhood policy initiatives, by streamlining sub-regional cooperation endeavours, embracing a sequential *modus operandi*, and directing efforts toward concrete outcomes, it can expect to fulfil its policy objectives and have a peaceful, prosperous South Asian neighbourhood.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

About Development Partnership. (n.d.). Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/page/about-development-partnership/>

About District Strategic Plan. (n.d.). Maharashtra State Development Board. Retrieved July 18, 2024, from <https://mahasdb.maharashtra.gov.in/DSP/aboutProgram>

Commerce Wing Brief. (2022, June 21). Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/page/about-trade-and-commerce/>

DECLARATION OF THE NINTH SAARC SUMMIT. (1997, May). SAARC. Retrieved April 30, 2024, from <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/resources/summit-declarations/14-ninth-saarc-summit-male-1997/file>

Export Import Data Bank. (n.d.). Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/ecntq.asp>

Export-Import Data Bank (Country-wise): Afghanistan. (n.d.). Department of Commerce, Government of India. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecnt.asp>

General Election to Parliamentary Constituencies: Trends & Results June-2024. (2024, June 5). Election Commission of India. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/index.htm>

Hydropower. (n.d.). Mekong River Commission (MRC). Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.mrcmekong.org/our-work/topics/hydropower/>

India- Sri Lanka Relations. (2021, July 1). High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Retrieved October 16, 2023, from <https://hcicolombo.gov.in/pages?id=eyJpdjI6Iit0TjFpQ3VQYjBjZm1DN0FaSGpaekE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoibU9kQ3IPdGd6aTE0VWtWM2hTWXhiUT09IiwibWFjIjozM2Y0ZWZhYjUyYTI0ZDgzMjMzMzg5ZmY3NTM0MjczNGQ5YTQ3NjdIMjI1ZGJkOGYwZjM5YjFiMTJjZmM4OTUyMSJ9&subid=eyJpdjI6IiVpdEVUamd1YmpjOEUzaGE2SDdGalE9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoibU9kQ3IPdGd6aTE0VWtWM2hTWXhiUT09IiwibWFjIjozM2Y0ZWZhYjUyYTI0ZDgzMjMzMzg5ZmY3NTM0MjczNGQ5YTQ3NjdIMjI1ZGJkOGYwZjM5YjFiMTJjZmM4OTUyMSJ9>

India-Afghanistan Relations. (2017, October). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/1Afghanistan_October_2017.pdf

India-Bangladesh bilateral Relations. (2024). In Ministry of External Relations, Government of India. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Bangladesh-February-2024.pdf>

India-Bangladesh bilateral Relations. (2024). In Ministry of External Relations, Government of India. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral-Brief-Bangladesh-February-2024.pdf>

India-Bangladesh Relations. (2014, July). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bangladesh_July_2014_.pdf

India-Bhutan Relations. (2014). In loksabhadocs.nic.in/. Lok Sabha Secretariat. Retrieved September 19, 2023, from https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/India-Bhutan%20Relations.pdf

India-Bhutan Relations. (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Ministry of External Affairs. Retrieved September 14, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_Bilateral_Brief_bhutan_Feb_2020.pdf

India-Bhutan Relations. (2023, March). Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=549>

India-Bhutan Relations. (2024, March). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_on_India_Bhutan_Relations_March_2024.pdf

India-Maldives Bilateral Relations. (2022). High Commission of India to Male. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://hci.gov.in/male/?pdf1185?000>

India-Myanmar - Bilateral brief. (2022, November). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Government of India. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Myanmar22Nov.pdf>

India-Myanmar Relations. (2013, July). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Myanmar_Relations.pdf

India-Myanmar Relations. (2018). Consulate General of India, Sittwe, Myanmar. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://www.cgisittwe.gov.in/page/india-myanmar-relations/>

India-Nepal Bilateral Relations. (2020, February). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; MEA, Govt. of India. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). (2017, March 7). Leaders' summit in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) & its related meetings [Press release]. Jakarta. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-03/iora-leaders-summit-press-release.pdf>

Indian Ocean Rim Association and India's Role. (2017, March 7). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORA_new.pdf

Indo-Lanka Accord. (n.d.). In UN Peacemaker. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN%20LK_870729_Indo-Lanka%20Accord.pdf

Joint Statement by India and Myanmar on the State visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar. (2012, May 28). [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/19893/Joint+Statement+by+India+and+Myanmar+on+the+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+India+to+Myanmar#:~:text=P.K.,all%20its%20forms%20and%20manifestations>

Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project. (2014, April 25). Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://mdoner.gov.in/kaladan-multi-modal-transit-transport-project-inland>

List of National Political Parties. (2024). In Election Commission of India. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYnJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZI5qMtjV1qgiFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT4%2B2%2BvJW%2BYW5YnFYBIJXuRyIgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

List of RUPPs, Delisted and Inactive RUPPs. (2024). In Election Commission of India. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYnJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZI5qMtjV1qgiFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT49qSWXyEJcR%2FnGOc%2B3Sx%2B2TgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

List of State Parties. (2024). In Election Commission of India. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://www.eci.gov.in/eci-backend/public/api/download?url=LMAhAK6sOPBp%2FNFF0iRfXbEB1EVSLT41NNLRjYnJJP1KivrUxbfqkDatmHy12e%2FzBiU51zPFZI5qMtjV1qgiFva%2BcZe4H5hLgRzEPbXgT4%2BEJecVc93B3LTxyyJga%2BpSgKdCmUSHqA1uyd%2BQgGswdQ%3D%3D>

Lok Sabha Secretariat. (2017). "SAARC": ITS IMPACT AND FUTURE. In [loksabhadocs.nic.in](https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/SAARC_Its_impact_future.pdf). Retrieved November 30, 2023, from https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/SAARC_Its_impact_future.pdf

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). (2017, March). Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Brief_MGC_March_2017.pdf

Mekong-U.S. Partnership: Regional Development Mission for Asia. (n.d.). U.S. Agency For International Development. Retrieved May 23, 2024, from <https://www.usaid.gov/asia-regional/lower-mekong-initiative-lmi>

Menon, S. (2007, May 3). "India and International Security." In Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. International Institute of Strategic Studies.
<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/1863/Speech+by+Foreign+Secretary+Shri+Shivshankar+Menon+on+India+and+International+Security+at+the+International+Institute+of+Strategic+Studies>

Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2018, July 18). Joint Military Exercises [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1539020>

Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2019, July 29). India and Myanmar sign MOU on defence Co-Operation [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1580637>

Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2015, January 31). Joint Press Release - The Second Joint Working Group (JWG) Meetings on Sub-Regional Cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) [Press release]. Retrieved January 8, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/24746/joint+press+release++the+second+joint+working+group+jwg+meetings+on+subregional+cooperation+between+bangladesh+bhutan+india+and+nepal+bbin+in+new+delhi+january+3031+2015>

Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2018, December 20). QUESTION NO.1127 STATUS OF TRILATERAL HIGHWAY PROJECT [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from [https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/30799/quEsti#:~:text=What's%20New-.QUESTION%20NO,STATUS%20OF%20TRILATERAL%20HIGHWAY%20PROJECT&text=India%20is%20undertaking%20two%20sections,TKK\)%20road%20section%20in%20Myanmar](https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/30799/quEsti#:~:text=What's%20New-.QUESTION%20NO,STATUS%20OF%20TRILATERAL%20HIGHWAY%20PROJECT&text=India%20is%20undertaking%20two%20sections,TKK)%20road%20section%20in%20Myanmar)

Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2022, March 8). Meeting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) [Press release]. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34935/Meeting+of+Bangladesh+Bhutan+India+and+Nepal+Motor+Vehicles+Agreement+BBIN+MVA#:~:text=Ministry%20of%20External%20Affairs%20Government%20of%20India&text=A%20meeting%20of%20India%2C%20Bangladesh,Secretary%2C%20Ministry%20of%20External%20Affairs>

Ministry of External Affairs. (2023, December 15). QUESTION NO. 183 India's Relationship with Afghanistan [Press release]. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/37428/QUESTION+NO+183+Indias+Relationship+with+Afghanistan>

Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. (2023, May 5). Shri Sarbananda Sonowal to receive the First Indian Cargo Ship docking at the Sittwe Port on May 9, 2023 [Press release]. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1922176>

Ministry of Road Transport & Highways. (2019, January 3). India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway [Press release]. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=187130>

Nepal-India Relations. (n.d.). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal. Retrieved August 28, 2023, from <https://mofa.gov.np/nepal-india-relations/>

Opening Remarks at the Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting. (2019, August 1) by M. Pompeo. U.S. Embassy in Burma. Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting, Myanmar. <https://mm.usembassy.gov/opening-remarks-at-the-lower-mekong-initiative-ministerial/>

Outcomes of the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting. (2023, July 16). [Press release]. PRESS RELEASE. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from https://mfaic.gov.kh/files/uploads/T2CEOJVJCWVG/With_Letterhead_PR_ENG_Outcome%20of%2012th%20MGC%20FMM.pdf

Press Information Bureau (PIB). (2023, November 1). India and Sri Lanka re-launch negotiations of the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) [Press release]. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1973859>

Sri Lanka. (n.d.). Indian Trade Portal. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://www.indiantradeportal.in/vs.jsp?lang=0&id=0,25,45,916,26638,28413>

Treaty or perpetual peace and friendship. (n.d.). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5242/treaty+or+perpetual+p>

Reports/ Briefs/ Theses

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bangladesh. (2023, December 7). United States Department of State. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/>

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan. (2023, December 7). United States Department of State. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement: Facilitating implementation and stakeholder buy-in in the BBIN sub-region (BBINMVA). (n.d.). CUTS CITEE. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from <https://cuts-citee.org/bbinmva/>

- Behr, T., & Jokela, J. (2011). Regionalism & Global Governance: the Emerging Agenda. In Studies & Research. Notre Europe. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/regionalism_globalgovernance_t.behr-j.jokela_ne_july2011_01.pdf
- Brauer, R., & Kliem, F. (n.d.). Coercive Water-Diplomacy: Playing Politics with the Mekong. In The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Based in Singapore. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung based in Singapore. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c82d2f4e-6ef5-3bad-c444-38e7739f7637&groupId=252038
- Harris, G. L., & Savada, A. M. (Eds.). (1993). Nepal and Bhutan: Country Studies (3rd ed.) [Library of Congress Website]. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/cntrystd.bt>
- High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka. (2013). HANDBOOK ON THE INDIA - SRI LANKA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://hcicolombo.gov.in/pdf/hb-india-sl.pdf>
- Hussain, N. (2024). Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation. Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief, No. 13, 1–3. <https://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/MKG%20PB-Feb%202024.pdf>
- Kelegama, S. (2014). The India–Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and the proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement: A closer look. In Asian Development Bank (No. 458). Asian Development Bank Institute. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156313/adbi-wp458.pdf>
- Pande, A. (2023, October 26). India’s Realpolitik Myanmar Policy. GIS Reports. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-myanmar-2/>
- Pillai, V. (2024, April 29). India becoming a bigger net exporter of electricity. Transmission & Distribution (T&D) India. Retrieved July 9, 2024, from <https://www.tndindia.com/india-becoming-a-bigger-net-exporter-of-electricity/>
- Preparatory Study for North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project. (2016). Japan International Cooperation Agency. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/social_environmental/id/asia/south/india/c8h0vm00009um3lwatt/c8h0vm0000bd9euo.pdf
- Price, G. (2013). India’s Policy towards Afghanistan. In Chatham House. Retrieved April 10, 2024, from https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf
- Sharma, A., & Rathore, C. (2015). BIMSTEC and BCIM Initiatives and Their Importance for India. In CUTS International. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://www.cuts-citee.org/pdf/BIMSTEC_and_BCIM_Initiatives_and_their_Importance_for_India.pdf

Taneja, N., Naing, T. H., Joshi, S., Singh, T. B., Bimal, S., Garg, S., Roy, R., & Sharma, M. (2019). India-Myanmar Border Trade. In Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from https://icrier.org/pdf/Working_Paper_378.pdf

Vishnu, P. M. (2015). Changing Trends in India Nepal Relations [PhD Dissertation, Sri Venkateswara University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/185274>

Books/ Book Chapters

Ahluwalia, I. J. (2003). Economic Cooperation in South Asia. In Japan International Cooperation Agency. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/IFIC_and_JBICI-Studies/jica-ri/english/publication/archives/jbic/report/paper/pdf/rp16_e09.pdf

Ansari, H. (2009). Changing Political Context in South Asia and Prospect of Security and Regional Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation (1st ed., pp. 3–8). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

Arndt, M. (2013). India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bajpai, K. (1995). Introduction: International Theory, International Society, Regional Politics, and Foreign Policy. In K. Bajpai & H. Shukul (Eds.), Interpreting World Politics: Essays for A P Rana (1st ed., pp. 11–42). Sage Publication.

Bose, S. (2006). A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire (1st ed.). Harvard University Press.

Buzan, B., & Waeber, O. (2003). Regions and Powers: the structure of international security (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Dash, K. C. (2008). Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930366>

De, P. (2011). ASEAN-India connectivity: An Indian perspective. In F. Kimura & S. Umezaki (Eds.), ASEAN-India Connectivity: The Comprehensive Asia Development Plan, Phase II (1st ed., pp. 95–150). ERIA. <https://www.eria.org/CHAPTER%20%20ASEAN%20-%20India%20Connectivity%20An%20Indian%20Perspective.pdf>

Dikshit, K. R., & Dikshit, J. K. (2014). North-East India: Land, People, and Economy (1st ed.). Springer.

Fawcett, L. (2005). Regionalism from a historical perspective. In M. Garrell, B. Hettne & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), Global politics of regionalism: Theory and practice. Pluto Press.

Fawcett, L. (2005). Regionalism from an Historical Perspective. In M. Farrell, B. Hettne, & L. V. Langenhove (Eds.), Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice (1st ed., pp. 21–37). Pluto Press.

- Hilali, A. Z. (2017). *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (1st ed.) [eBook]. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235165>
- Holsti, K. J. (1996). *The State, War, and the State of War* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://ir101.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/holsti-1996-the-state-war-and-the-state-of-war-compressed.pdf>
- Khan, R. (1992). *Federal India: A Design for Change* (1st ed.). Vikas Publishing House.
- Khan, Y. (2017). *The Great Partition*. Yale University Press.
- Klecha-Tylec, K. (2017). The theoretical and practical dimensions of regionalism in East Asia. In Springer eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40262-8>
- Mallempati, S. (2022). Security Dynamics in India-Sri Lanka Relations: Post-2009. In Sapru House Paper (1st ed.). Indian Council of World Affairs. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/SHPSecurityDynamicsIndiaSriLankaRelationsweb.pdf>
- Mitrany, David (1975). *The Functional Theory of Politics*. Martin Robinson.
- Muni, S. D. (2009). India and Regional Peace and Cooperation. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 109–120). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.
- Naidu, G. V. C. (2015). Prospects for IOR-ARC Regionalism: An Indian Perspective. In D. Rumley & T. Doyle (Eds.), *Indian Ocean Regionalism* (1st ed., p. 25). Routledge.
- Ngampramuan, S., & Ploberger, C. (2020). *Sub-regionalism and International River Basins: Evaluating the Integration of the Mekong and Danube* (1st ed.). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nye, J.S. (1972). The Strength of International Regionalism. In Günter, H. (Eds) *Transnational Industrial Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rahman, A. (2009). Common Challenges Facing South Asia: A Perspective from Bangladesh. In A. K. Behuria (Ed.), *South Asia: The Quest for Regional Cooperation* (1st ed., pp. 9–22). Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.
- Rahman, S. H., Wijayatunga, P. D. C., Gunatilake, H., & Fernando, P. N. (2012). *Energy trade in South Asia: opportunities and challenges* (1st ed.) [eBook]. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29703/energy-trade-south-asia.pdf>
- Singh, R. (2009). *Global dimensions of Indo-Nepal Political Relations: Post Independence* (1st ed.). Gyan Publishing House.
- Soderbaum, F. (2003). Introduction: Theories of new regionalism. In F. Soderbaum & T. M. Shaw (Eds.), *Theories of new regionalism: A Palgrave reader*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Von Tunzelmann, A. (2012). *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire*. Simon and Schuster.

Weigall, David (2002). *International Relations-A Concise Companion*. Arnold Publishers.

Journal Articles

Bhasin, M. (2008). India's Role in South Asia: Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership? *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 3(4), 72–88. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45340757>

Fawcett, L., & Gandois, H. (2010). Regionalism in Africa and the Middle East: Implications for EU studies. *Revue D'intégration Européenne/Journal of European Integration*, 32(6), 617–636. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2010.518719>

Ganaie, R. A., & Ganaie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01489-7>

Gill, D. M. (2020). Challenges to Regional Cooperation in South Asia: An Overview. *Journal of International Affairs*, 3, 42–51. <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/joia/article/view/29081/23580>

Gochhayat, A. (2014). Regionalism and sub-regionalism: A theoretical framework with special reference to India. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 8(1), 10–26. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2013.0611>

Gu, J. (1983, July 29). The Population and Economic Problems of South Asia. PubMed. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12313019/>

Haas, E. B. (1958). The Challenge of Regionalism. *International Organization*, 12(4), 440–458

Hettne, B. (2006). Beyond the 'New' Regionalism. *New Political Economy*, 10(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460500344484>

Hettne, B., & Soderbaum, F. (1998). The New Regionalism Approach. *Politeia*, 17(3), 6–21. https://www.academia.edu/5747413/The_New_Regionalism_Approach

Islam, M. (2023). Bangladesh and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): Future Dynamics. *BIISS Journal*, 44(1), 1–19. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371475272_Bangladesh_and_Indian_Ocean_Rim_Association_IORA_The_Future_Dynamics

Jarrar, Y. (2016, December 9). By 2030, what will regional governance look like? World Economic Forum. Retrieved April 29, 2024, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/by-2030-what-will-regional-governance-look-like/>

Khan, A. R. (2015). Impediments to the Success of SAARC. *South Asian Studies*, 30(1), 291–302. https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/19%20Ahmad%20Raza%20Khan_30_1.pdf

- Livani, T., Rizwan, N., & Kathuria, S. (2019). Inclusive Regional Trade: Promoting the economic empowerment of women in the BBIN region. *Antyajaa*, 4(1), 33–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632719836801>
- Muni, S. D. (1985). SARC: Building Regionalism from below. *Asian Survey*, 25(4), 391–404.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2644225>
- Murthy, P. (1999). India and Nepal: Security and Economic Dimensions. *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII (9). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99mup01.html#txt1
- Murthy, P. (1999). Indo-Bhutan relations: Serving Mutual Interests. *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII (1). https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_99mup03.html
- Niaz, M. T. (2022). REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA: UTOPIA OR REALITY? *Margalla Papers*, 26(1), 108–120. <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/101>
- Paul, A. (2020). Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Exploring the Three Pillars of Regionalism and their Relevance. *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, 01(02).
<https://doi.org/10.1142/s2717541320500084>
- Raja Mohan, C. (2006). Cooperative Security in South Asia. *South Asian Studies*, 13, 345–356.
- Tiwari, C. K. (1985). South Asian Regionalism: Problems and Prospects. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 12(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.1985.9933657>
- Venter, D. (2001). The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-Operation (IOR-ARC): Reality or Imagery? *Africa Quarterly*, 41(3), 1–32.
- Véron, J. (2008). La démographie de l'Asie du Sud des années 1950 aux années 2000. *Population*, Vol. 63(1), 9–92. <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.801.0009>
- Yhome, K., & Maini, T. S. (2017). India's Evolving Approach to Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond [Journal-article]. *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 2(3), 147–165.
<https://rpquarterly.kureselcalismalar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/vol2.3-yhome-maini.pdf>

News Pieces (Newspapers/ AV Media/ Online Media/ News Magazines, etc.)

- Anand, M. (2020, October 6). Steps on to complete India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highways. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/061020/steps-on-to-complete-india-myanmar-thailand-trilateral-highways.html>
- Atmakuri, A., & Izzuddin, M. (2020, January 8). Why Myanmar should matter to India. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/why-myanmar-should-matter-to-india/>
- Bangladesh-India relations: Progress made and the Challenges Ahead. (2016, September 17). In *The Daily Star*. The Daily Star - IPAG Dialogue, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Retrieved August 31,

2023, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/bangladesh-india-relations-progress-made-and-the-challenges-ahead-1295740>

Bangladesh-India-Bhutan meet in Dhaka Thursday, Friday. (2013, April 16). Bangladesh Business News. <https://businessnews-bd.net/bangladesh-india-bhutan-meet-in-dhaka-thursday-friday/>

BBC News. (2024, June 4). India elections 2024: When were they, who could vote and why do they matter? BBC. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68678594>

Bhalla, A. (2019, June 17). Operation Sunrise: India-Myanmar target insurgent groups camp in North East. India Today. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/operation-sunrise-india-myanmar-target-insurgent-groups-camp-in-north-east-1550835-2019-06-17>

Bhushan, R. (2024, February 5). India-Taliban thaw on Afghanistan: What really is happening? Hindustan Times. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indiataliban-thaw-on-afghanistan-what-really-is-happening-101707110103889.html>

Chakrabarty, S. (2024, June 7). 65.79% turnout in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, says Election Commission. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/india-general-election-2024-6579-turnout-in-2024-lok-sabha-polls-says-election-commission/article68259360.ece>

Chaudhury, D. R. (2024, March 23). India, Bhutan explore setting up of new hydropower projects. The Economic Times. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/power/india-bhutan-explore-setting-up-of-new-hydropower-projects/articleshow/108737630.cms?from=mdr>

Cogan, M. S. (2023, July 31). India's Foreign Policy Progress in Sri Lanka is a Strategic Setback for China. The Diplomat. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/indias-foreign-policy-progress-in-sri-lanka-is-a-strategic-setback-for-china/>

D'Souza, S. M. (2023, September 20). Hobson's choice for India in Taliban-Held Afghanistan. The Diplomat. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/hobsons-choice-for-india-in-taliban-held-afghanistan/>

Dalrymple, W. (2015, June 22). The bloody legacy of Indian partition. The New Yorker. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

Ghafoor, M. A. (2023, October 12). Maldives' Presidential Election Was Not A Referendum on India or China. The Diplomat. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/maldives-presidential-election-was-not-a-referendum-on-india-or-china/>

Gurung, S. (2023, September 21). Fortified Himalayas: Why Nepal Can't Shake its Dependence on India. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/fortified-himalayas-why-nepal-cant-shake-its-dependence-on-india/>

Haidar, S. (2023, October 16). How is the Indian Ocean Rim Association a key bloc for India? *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-is-the-indian-ocean-rim-association-a-key-bloc-for-india-explained/article67421544.ece>

Haidar, S. (2023, October 6). Worldview with Suhasini Haidar | Muizzu's win | How will it impact India-Maldives relations? [Video]. *The Hindu*. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/worldview-with-suhasini-haidar-muizzus-win-how-will-it-impact-india-maldives-relations/article67388872.ece>

IANS. (2022, April 1). Pakistan's interior ministry blames Iran for the regrouping of Baloch nationalists. *The Times of India*. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistans-interior-ministry-blames-iran-for-the-regrouping-of-baloch-nationalists/articleshow/90587769.cms>

India raises Nepal grant by 29 percent to Rs8.8 billion. (2023, February 1). *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2023/02/01/india-raises-nepal-grant-by-29-percent-to-rs8-8-billion>

India-Myanmar bilateral trade may rise significantly once rupee trade settlement mechanism is established: (2023b, June 12). *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/trade/exports/insights/india-myanmar-bilateral-trade-may-rise-significantly-once-rupee-trade-settlement-mechanism-is-established-eeep/articleshow/100933839.cms?from=mdr>

Indian govt gifts 35 ambulances and 66 school buses in Nepal districts. (2024, April 14). *DD News*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/indian-govt-gifts-35-ambulances-and-66-school-buses-in-nepal-districts/>

Jacob, H. (2022, November 8). The age of minimalism in India-Pakistan ties. *The Hindu*. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-age-of-minimalism-in-india-pakistan-ties/article66108192.ece>

Kabul sought Pakistan-Afghanistan merger in 1954. (2017, January 28). *The News International*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/182352-Kabul-sought-Pakistan-Afghanistan-merger-in-1954>

Kadrigamar, L. (2003, December 29). Securing South Asia. *The Hindu*.

Kaul, A. (2017, March 7). IORA Nations Decide to Support Each Other to Counter Terrorism. *India Today*.

- Krishnan, M. (2023, November 21). Myanmar's rebel offensive: How worried should India be? dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmars-rebel-offensive-how-worried-should-india-be/a-67507328>
- Kumar, R. (2023, December 1). Is Modi's India cosying up to the Taliban? Al Jazeera. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/1/is-modis-india-cosying-up-to-the-taliban>
- Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Blessing or curse? (2019, April 3). The ASEAN Post. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/lancang-mekong-cooperation-blessing-or-curse#:~:text=While%20China%20pulling%20out%20of,this%20great%20river%20for%20survival>
- Laskar, R. H. (2024, March 22). Modi announces ₹10k crore support for Bhutan over next 5 years. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/modi-announces-10k-crore-support-for-bhutan-over-next-5-years-101711119772944.html>
- Lian, T. T. (2023, September 19). The Indian Trilateral Highway Project and Myanmar's Spring Revolution. The Diplomat. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-indian-trilateral-highway-project-and-myanmars-spring-revolution/>
- Mohanty, S. C. (2024, March 1). Management of Indo-Myanmar Border. Arunachal Times. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2024/03/01/management-of-indo-myanmar-border/>
- Munjal, D. (2022, April 6). Explained | What is the BIMSTEC grouping and how is it significant? The Hindu. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-what-is-the-bimstec-grouping-and-how-is-it-significant/article65275690.ece>
- Naeem, R. (2020, December). The watershed moment in 1970 elections that broke Pakistan. The Wire. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://thewire.in/south-asia/elections-that-broke-pakistan-1970-history>
- Padmanabhan, K., & Krishnankutty, P. (2024, April 4). India-Myanmar-Thailand highway — final piece of the puzzle in New Delhi's Atlantic to Pacific push. The Print. <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-myanmar-thailand-highway-final-piece-of-the-puzzle-in-new-delhis-atlantic-to-pacific-push/2027359/>
- Panda, A. (2017, March 8). Indian Ocean RIM Association concludes First-Ever Leaders' Summit. The Diplomat. Retrieved January 16, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/indian-ocean-rim-association-concludes-first-ever-leaders-summit/>
- Pasricha, A. (2024, February 9). IMF flags BRI partner Maldives' high debt. Voice of America. Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/imf-flags-bri-partner-maldives-high-debt/7480862.html>

Pattanaik, S. S. (2023, April 12). Revisiting India-Bhutan Relations. The Kathmandu Post. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2023/04/12/revisiting-india-bhutan-relations>

Peter, Z. (2023, June 30). India urged to end arms exports to War-Torn Myanmar. Voice of America. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-urged-to-end-arms-exports-to-war-torn-myanmar/7159938.html>

Poudel, S. S. (2022, June 23). India-Nepal Diplomatic Relations at 75: Full of Contradictions. The Diplomat. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/india-nepal-diplomatic-relations-at-75-full-of-contradictions/>

Poudel, S. S. (2022, September). SAARC is Dead. Long Live Subregional Cooperation. The Diplomat. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/saarc-is-dead-long-live-sub-regional-co-operation/>

Pradhan, S. B. (2023, June 4). Nepal's 81.19 per cent population is Hindu even as followers of Hinduism, Buddhism decline and Islam, Christians increase. The Print. <https://theprint.in/world/nepals-81-19-per-cent-population-is-hindu-even-as-followers-of-hinduism-buddhism-decline-and-islam-christians-increase/1611622/>

Press Trust of India. (2015, October 28). Pakistan supported, trained terror groups: Pervez Musharraf. www.business-standard.com. Retrieved September 7, 2023, from https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/pakistan-supported-trained-terror-groups-pervez-musharraf-115102800015_1.html

Press Trust of India. (2018, January 10). Indian Army killed 138 Pakistani soldiers in 2017 in tactical operations. The Economic Times. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-army-killed-138-pakistani-soldiers-in-2017-in-tactical-operations/articleshow/62443429.cms?from=mdr>

Press Trust of India. (2018, July 1). More than 19,500 mother tongues spoken in India: Census. The Indian Express. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/more-than-19500-mother-tongues-spoken-in-india-census-5241056/>

Press Trust of India. (2019, January 3). Govt releases Rs 193.16 cr fund for India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project. www.business-standard.com. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-releases-rs-193-16-cr-fund-for-india-myanmar-thailand-highway-project-119010300502_1.html

Press Trust of India. (2021, March 9). BBIN countries in South Asia can be economic growth pole: WB India head. Business Standard. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/bbin-countries-in-south-asia-can-be-economic-growth-pole-wb-india-head-121030901373_1.html

Press Trust of India. (2023, July 16). EAM Jaishankar meets Myanmar, Thailand counterparts; discusses India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. Deccan Herald.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/india/eam-jaishankar-meets-myanmar-thailand-counterparts-discusses-india-myanmar-thailand-trilateral-highway-1237415.html>

Press Trust of India. (2024, April 4). Nepal, India should receive EPG report as soon as possible, says Maoist leader Bhusal. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/nepal-india-epg-report-maoist-leader-bhusal-9249795/>

Ramaswamy, S. (2015, June 22). A Boost to Sub-Regionalism in South Asia. The Diplomat. Retrieved January 6, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/a-boost-to-sub-regionalism-in-south-asia/>

SAARC Covid-19 Emergency Fund: No Progress on the Ground. (2021, August 9). Nepal Live Today. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.nepallivetoday.com/2021/08/09/saarc-covid-19-emergency-fund-no-progress-on-the-ground>

Sengupta, B. (1984). The Big Brother Syndrome. India Today.

Sharma, K. (2017). Modi backs India-Myanmar-Thailand highways Indochina extension. Nikkei Asia. Retrieved January 14, 2024, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Modi-backs-IndiaMyanmarThailandhighway-extension>

Sharma, R. (2015, June 11). Setting the tone for future. Arab News. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://www.arabnews.com/node/760086/amp>

Singh, H. (2016, April). Pakistan's policy of a thousand cuts. The Tribune. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/pakistan-s-policy-of-a-thousand-cuts-219127>

Srivastava, R. (2024). Indian Ocean RIM Association Gaining Deeper Significance. Indian Defence Review, Net edition. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indian-ocean-rim-association-gaining-deeper-significance/>

Srivastava, R. (2024). Indian Ocean RIM Association Gaining Deeper Significance. Indian Defence Review, Net edition. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indian-ocean-rim-association-gaining-deeper-significance/>

Xuanmin, L. (2022, July 19). Lancang-Mekong Cooperation built on mutual political trust, voluntary participation: Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar. The Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270900.shtml>

Zakaria, A. (2019, December 16). Remembering the war of 1971 in East Pakistan. Opinions | Al Jazeera. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/16/remembering-the-war-of-1971-in-east-pakistan>

Webpages/ Online Articles

Abeyagoonasekera, A. (2021, June 22). How China won over local agency to shackle Sri Lanka using a port city. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 12, 2023, from

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-china-won-over-local-agency-to-shackle-sri-lanka-using-a-port-city/>

Agarwal, T. (2014, September). Regional cooperation in South Asia – Benefit to all. BRIEF India. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.briefindia.com/regional-cooperation-in-south-asia-benefit-to-all/>

Agriculture and Food Security – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/agriculture-and-food-security-2/#:~:text=BIMSTEC%20region%20is%20home%20to,common%20people's%20principal%20employment%20source.>

Ahmed, S. N. (2023, June 6). Enriching the Defence Contours of India-Maldives Relations. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Enriching-the-Defence-Contours-of-India-Maldives-Relations-NSAhmed-060623>

Attri, V. N. (n.d.). Growing Strength of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) And Emerging Global Development Paradigms [Slide show]. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). <https://hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/6606/Growing%20strength%20of%20IORA.pdf>

Bajoria, J. (2009, July 22). India-Afghanistan Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-afghanistan-relations>

Barr, W. (Ed.). (2013, February). U.S. Detected Indian Nuclear Test Preparations in 1995, but Photo Evidence was “Clear As Mud.” The National Security Archive, George Washington University. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb412/>

BAY OF BENGAL INITIATIVE FOR MULTI-SECTORAL TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION (BIMSTEC). (2016). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.mofa.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Revised-BIMSTEC-Brief.pdf>

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). (n.d.). Asia Regional Integration Centre. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/bay-of-bengal-initiative-for-multi-sectoral-technical-and-economic-cooperation>

BBC World Service Polls. (2017). <https://web.archive.org/>. Retrieved August 25, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20210608143515/https://globescan.com/images/images/pressrelease/s/bbc2017_country_ratings/BBC2017_Country_Ratings_Poll.pdf

Busbarat, P. (2020, August 31). Major powers react to rising Chinese influence in Mekong. Think China. Retrieved December 26, 2023, from <https://www.thinkchina.sg/society/major-powers-react-rising-chinese-influence-mekong>

Chari, P. (1999, June). Kargil, LoC and the Simla Agreement. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=210

Deb, A. (2022). India and Bangladesh: A Multifaceted Relationship. CLAWS Journal, 15(1), 56–71. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/80425/ssoar-claws-2022-1-deb-India_and_Bangladesh_A_Multi.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-claws-2022-1-deb-India_and_Bangladesh_A_Multi.pdf

Delinić, T. (2011). SAARC – 25 Years of Regional Integration in South Asia. In Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8a368f41-f5d0-6ffe-1d25-9a4a1a0a35a3&groupId=252038

Dialogue Partners. (n.d.). IORA. Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/dialogue-partners>

Didi, R. M. (2022, November 21). The Maldives’ Tug of War Over India and National Security. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/21/maldives-tug-of-war-over-india-and-national-security-pub-88418>

Fact Sheet: India and Pakistan Sanctions. (1998, June 18). US Department of State Archive. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/sa/fs_980618_india_pak.html

FAIR Team. (2023, February). India-Bangladesh CEPA Deal: A Critical Analysis. Foreign Affairs Insights and Reviews (FAIR). Retrieved August 30, 2023, from <https://fairbd.net/india-bangladesh-cepa-deal-a-critical-analysis/#:~:text=will%20be%20affected%3F-.What%20is%20CEPA%3F,partnership%20between%20the%20two%20countries>

Fawthrop, T. (2017, January 17). Cambodian backflip bolsters China on the Mekong. The Interpreter. Retrieved January 8, 2024, from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cambodian-backflip-bolsters-china-mekong>

Fruman, C. (2024, March 16). In northeast India, all roads lead to greater development. World Bank Blogs. Retrieved July 18, 2024, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/northeast-india-all-roads-lead-greater-development>

Gambhir, M. (2020, April). Evolution of Regional and Subregional Cooperation in South Asia. Centre for Land Warfare Studies. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.claws.in/evolution-of-regional-and-sub-regional-cooperation-in-south-asia/>

Gambhir, M. (2022, September 12). India-Bangladesh Relations: Conditional to a Sheikh Hasina Government? South Asian Voices. Retrieved August 31, 2023, from

<https://southasianvoices.org/india-bangladesh-relations-conditional-to-a-sheikh-hasina-government/>

GDP (Current US\$)- South Asia. (2023). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=8S>

GDP based on PPP, Share of the World. (2024). International Monetary Fund. Retrieved April 26, 2024, from <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/SAQ>

Gupta, R. (2023, July 31). Fault lines persist in India–Nepal relations. East Asia Forum. Retrieved September 28, 2023, from <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/07/31/fault-lines-persist-in-india-nepal-relations/>

History – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/bimstec-history/>

India (IND) and Maldives (MDV) trade. (n.d.). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Retrieved July 25, 2024, from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/mdv>

India (IND) and Nepal (NPL) trade. (n.d.). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/npl>

India partition: our response to the refugee crisis. (n.d.). British Red Cross. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/our-movement/our-history/india-partition-the-red-cross-response-to-the-refugee-crisis>

India-Myanmar Trade and Investment: Prospects and Way Forward. (2019). In EXIM Bank of India. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.eximbankindia.in/Assets/Dynamic/PDF/Publication-Resources/Newsletters/93file.pdf>

India–Bangladesh Relations @50: Commemorating Bilateral Ties. (n.d.). Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/series/india-bangladesh-relations-50-commemorating-bilateral-ties/>

Indo-Pak Relations. (n.d.). European Foundation for South Asian Studies. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://www.efsas.org/topics/indo-pak-relations.html>

IORA Observer Organization. (n.d.). IORA. Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/iora-observer-organization>

IORA Member States. (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int/member-states>

IORA. (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2024, from <https://www.iora.int>

Jaisawal, P. (2017, August 16). India-Nepal Relations: Mixed Fortunes. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5338

Johnson, D. (n.d.). India-Pakistan Relations: a 50-Year History. Asia Society. Retrieved August 24, 2023, from <https://asiasociety.org/education/india-pakistan-relations-50-year-history>

Kesavan, K. V. (2020, February 14). India's 'Act East' policy and regional cooperation. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-act-east-policy-and-regional-cooperation-61375/>

Lal, R. (2024, January 17). Taking a People-Centric approach to building closer India-Myanmar ties. IndBiz | Economic Diplomacy Division, Government of India. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://indbiz.gov.in/taking-a-people-centric-approach-to-building-closer-india-myanmar-ties/>

Languages of South Asia. (n.d.). Center for South Asia Outreach. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://southasiaoutreach.wisc.edu/languages/>

LightCastle Analytics Wing. (2022, July). India Bangladesh Transit Treaty (Part I): The Costs and the Opportunities. LightCastle Partners. Retrieved August 30, 2023, from <https://www.lightcastlebd.com/insights/2020/11/india-bangladesh-transit-treaty-part-i-the-costs-and-the-opportunities/>

List of MoUs/Agreement signed during the visit of President of Myanmar to India. (2016, August 29). Vivekananda International Foundation; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from <https://vifdatabase.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2016-Pres-visit-to-India.pdf>

Lower Mekong Initiative. (2019, February 21). United States Department of State. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://www.state.gov/lower-mekong-initiative/>

Manoharan, N. (2017, June 28). India-Maldives Relations: A Tale of Two Concerns. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5311

Mechanism – Home-The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). (2021). BIMSTEC. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://bimstec.org/bimstec-mechanism-3/>

Mishra, R. (2022, April 12). India's Pivotal Role in the BIMSTEC. Universiti Malaya. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from <https://aei.um.edu.my/india-s-pivotal-role-in-the-bimstec>

Mohan, V. (2021, August 25). Changing Political Dynamics in South Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects on Indian Regional Hegemony. Air University. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=10&ModuleId=20562&Article=2743694>

Nepali, R. K. (2009). Democracy in South Asia. In www.idea.int. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from

<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/the-role-of-the-european-union-in-democracy-building/eu-democracy-building-discussion-paper-5.pdf>

Paliwal, A. (2017). NEW ALIGNMENTS, OLD BATTLEFIELD: REVISITING INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN. In Carnegie India. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved April 6, 2024, from

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6152017_Paliwal_IndiasRoleinAfghanistan_Web.pdf

Pandey, P. (2023, November 14). IORA's Indo-Pacific Outlook and its Significant Role in the Region. Indian Council of World Affairs. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from

https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10176&lid=6492

Pant, H. V., & Shivamurthy, A. G. (2023, June 7). India-Nepal Relations Soar High. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 26, 2023, from

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-nepal-relations-soar-high/>

Population Density (Per sq. km of land area)- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=8S>

Population of Southern Asia (2024) - Worldometer. (2024, April 25). Worldometer. Retrieved April 26, 2024, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-asia-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Southern,among%20subregions%20ranked%20by%20Population>

Population of Southern Asia (2024) - Worldometer. (2024, July 2). Worldometer. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-asia-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Southern,among%20subregions%20ranked%20by%20Population>

Population, Total- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

Population, total- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

Pulami, M. J., & Aryal, S. K. (2023, April). Finding an End to Border Disputes: the India-Nepal Imperative. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 28, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/finding-an-end-to-border-disputes/>

Raja Mohan, C. (2022, January). India and South Asia: The Elusive Sphere of Influence. Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS. Retrieved August 14, 2023, from https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-and-south-asia-the-elusive-sphere-of-influence/#_ftn7

Rajagopalan, R. P. (2023, August 7). Sri Lankan President visits India, highlights close relations. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/sri-lankan-president-visits-india-highlights-close-relations/>

- Ranjan, A. (2024, April 26). Parliamentary Elections in the Maldives. Institute of South Asian Studies- NUS. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/parliamentary-elections-in-the-maldives/>
- Revi, V. (2023, July 31). Maintaining momentum in India–Maldives relations. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved October 19, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/maintaining-momentum-in-india-maldives-relations/>
- Roy, R. (2022, September 5). Building India-Afghanistan Economic Relations - ICRIER. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Retrieved April 6, 2024, from <https://icrier.org/publications/building-india-afghanistan-economic-relations/>
- Saha, P. (2023, May 11). The 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests: reactions and responses from the Indo-Pacific. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-1998-pokhran-nuclear-tests/>
- Schaeffer, K. (2021, September 21). Key findings about the religious composition of India. Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>
- Shakya, T. (2015, April 29). In conversation on ‘Is China Building Up Soft Power by Aiding Nepal?’ ChinaFile. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/china-building-soft-power-aiding-nepal>
- Shende, S. (2023, August 23). Two Years After Taliban Takeover: What is India’s Afghanistan Policy? South Asian Voices. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <https://southasianvoices.org/two-years-after-taliban-takeover-what-is-indias-afghanistan-policy/>
- Singh, U. B. (2021, May). Post-Coup Myanmar and India’s response. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/post-coup-myanmar-indias-response-ubsingh-210521>
- Singh, U. B. (2022, January). Indian Foreign Secretary’s visit to Myanmar. Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/indian-foreign-secy-visit-to-myanmar-ubsingh-240122>
- Sinha Roy, G. (2020, October 20). India-Myanmar Defence Convergences: Facilitating cooperation and stability. Centre for Land Warfare Studies. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.claws.in/india-myanmar-defence-convergences-facilitating-cooperation-and-stability/>
- South & Central Asia. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>
- South & Central Asia. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia>

South and Central Asia | Modern history. (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://world101.cfr.org/rotw/south-asia/modern-history#pakistan-is-born-as-british-exit-subcontinent>

South Asia Regional Micro Database (SARMD). (2019, July 22). World Bank. Retrieved July 27, 2024, from https://worldbank.github.io/SARMD_guidelines/poverty-measures.html

Staniland, P. (2020, September 3). Political Violence in South Asia: The Triumph of the State? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved August 8, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/political-violence-in-south-asia-triumph-of-state-pub-82641>

Steinbuks, J., Timilsina, G., & Alberini, A. (2022, March 17). Economics of unreliable power supply: lessons from the 2006-2017 Nepal power crisis. World Bank Blogs. Retrieved December 17, 2023, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/economics-unreliable-power-supply-lessons-2006-2017-nepal-power-crisis>

Surface Area (Sq.KM)- South Asia. (2024). World Bank. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?locations=8S>

Thakur, J. (2021, March 24). India-Bangladesh Trans-Boundary River Management: Understanding the Tipaimukh Dam Controversy. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-trans-boundary-river-management-understanding-the-tipaimukh-dam-controversy-60419/>

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Its Possible Eastward Extension to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam: Challenges and Opportunities. (2020). In Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Retrieved January 13, 2024, from <https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/2020-02-Trilateral-Highway-Report/Trilateral-Highway-Background-Papers.pdf>

The Way Ahead for India-Afghanistan Relations. (2016). In Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230523111914.pdf>

Vasisht, C. (2020, September 8). India-Myanmar Relations: An Analysis of Connectivity Diplomacy. The Kootneeti. Retrieved March 26, 2024, from <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/03/india-myanmar-relation-an-analysis-of-connectivity-diplomacy/>

Wagner, C. (2020, November). The India-China competition in the Himalayas: Nepal and Bhutan | ISPI. Italian Institute International Political Studies. Retrieved August 14, 2023, from <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/india-china-competition-himalayas-nepal-and-bhutan-28258>

What is SASEC? (n.d.). SASEC. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=what-is-sasec>

Where We Work: South Asia. (n.d.). World Bank. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/where-we-work>

Why South Asia? Trade. (2022). World Bank. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade>

Wignaraja, G., & Kripalani, M. (2023, August 2). India and Sri Lanka lay the ground work for closer economic ties. East Asia Forum. Retrieved October 18, 2023, from <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/08/02/india-and-sri-lanka-lay-the-groundwork-for-closer-economic-ties/>

World Bank Open Data. (n.d.). In World Bank. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=8S-IN>

World City Populations 2023. (2024). World Population Review. Retrieved July 5, 2024, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities>

Xavier, C. (2021, January). Connect East: Explaining India's BIMSTEC Focus. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <http://20.244.136.131/expert-speak/connect-east-explaining-indias-bimstec-focus>

Yhome, K. (2017). 'Acting East' through India's Subregions. Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved August 9, 2023, from https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ORF_Occasional_Paper_123_Acting_East.pdf