

ABSTRACT

India engages with its neighbours at both bilateral and multilateral levels. 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; and India's engagement with SAARC should be looked at from this evolving perspective. SAARC has fallen short of its expectations for many reasons though, and it has become nearly dormant since the 2014 Kathmandu Summit.

As a complementary means to SAARC, India started experimenting with sub-regional platforms since the mid-1990s. Realising SAARC's inability to overcome bilateral frictions among the members and to keep on its growth trajectory amidst a peaceful neighbourhood, these platforms were seen as a necessary instrument for India to engage the neighbours. Experiencing some initial success, New Delhi's conviction in these 'minilaterals' grew and it started participating in many such groupings. Over time, stretching its commitment to a number of such initiatives have ultimately led to thinning down of resource allocation to each one of them though. As a result, a noticeable inertia has been seen in those platforms lately. These are essential to keep China's expanding strategic footprint in the neighbourhood in check and safeguarding New Delhi's interests in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, given the complexities in building and sustaining regionalism in South Asia as a whole, it is imperative too. But the overlapping membership and mandate of multitude of sub-regional mechanisms seem to strain its resources and affect their overall efficiency.

This research looks for whether sub-regional architectures can work as an alternative, or complementary, to regional cooperation mechanism in India's neighbourhood policy; and it proposes an incremental approach with regard to such architectures, starting with the smaller ones like BBIN and moving on to the larger ones like the BIMSTEC would have been more beneficial in place of diving into all of them at once.