

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

SYNOPSIS OF THESIS

**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
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SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS

Background

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 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. 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.

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. 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 previous stand though; and India became one of the founding members of the regional association in 1985.

Since the 1990s, the idea of 'collective prosperity' has served as a fundamental tenet of India's new regional strategy. The essential reason for New Delhi's redrawing of strategy was the emerging realities of a post-Cold War world which incidentally coincided with China's rise and India's path to liberalisation of its economy. As SAARC started faltering in delivery of its promises soon after its establishment for the complexities arising out of several reasons, India

started looking for alternative means of engagement, where the roadblocks of SAARC could be side-stepped. In such a context, to encourage economic growth in eastern 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 ‘collaborative sub-regionalism’. Outside the SAARC framework too, India 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 ensuring free flow of commodities, services, capital, and technology throughout the Indian Ocean region and among the member states.

India’s new regional approach has been greatly influenced by two strategic considerations in particular. 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. 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. The ‘Gujral Doctrine’ in the mid-1990s 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 with them. It was done in the hopes that an interwoven economy and its benefits would refrain these neighbours from going against Indian interests, and this would also limit the negative impact of any development in those countries on the Indian economy.

Statement of the Problem

India has been, thus, an early starter with regard to sub-regional cooperation; but over time its efforts have got diluted due to participating in so many of such arrangements. Also, overlapping

pattern of membership and mandate have impacted India's efforts adversely. For example, the first experiment in the form of SAGQ which focused on expanding economic connectivity among the three neighbours of the north and east with India's north-eastern provinces had lost direction with the inclusion of members such as Sri Lanka or Maldives into its fold. These island nations, though very important to India's outreach to the Indian Ocean region, have very distinctive needs and aspiration than that of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. As a result, though SAGQ evolved into a formal organisation in the shape of the South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) in the early 2000s, its achievements remained muted due to such membership expansion and extended focus areas. Moreover, with such expansion SASEC now looks like a mini-SAARC minus Pakistan and Afghanistan and plus Myanmar. Then there's the BIMSTEC which has the same members as the SASEC minus Maldives and plus Thailand. Again, there is 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 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 somewhat 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 the easiest one, like 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, particularly with regard to these sub-regional platforms which are full of promises, India's neighbourhood policy will be unable to meet its desired objectives.

Hypothesis

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.

Rationale and Scope of the Study

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. In 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.

A fertile ground is present for India's cooperation with the smaller neighbours though, 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 (Pakistan and Afghanistan) 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 analyses 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 discusses regionalism under SAARC, and from there on it takes note of the sub-regional groupings starting from the BIMSTEC and delving deep into other four, the MGC, the IORA, BBIN and the IMTT Highway. This study seeks to establish the overlapping nature of these initiatives in terms of membership and mandate, 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 the future.

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.

Chapter Model

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

- *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 in this chapter 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 with regard to 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 in most cases 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 are 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 attention separately.

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

Research Findings

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.

Now, the hypothesis has been 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 is 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?

Let us now try to look at the findings one by one following the above research questions.

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. 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.

Therefore, India wields significant political influence in South Asia 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 credentials and its leadership role in the non-aligned movement.

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.

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. 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 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 ensued in South Asian theatre. The smaller neighbours now often 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.

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. 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 the two maritime neighbours on the south, the situation is rather peaceful, 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. China'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. What made the already chaotic South Asian theatre with an imminent British exit further volatile was the partition. 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.

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 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.

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 collaborate. 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.

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 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 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.

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, the

people somehow detest 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, and it 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. 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.