

# INTEGRATING (?) A FRACTURED REGION: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD SOUTH ASIAN INTEGRATION

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## ***Abstract***

South Asia is the world's most populous region and has a burgeoning population of young, talented individuals. Unfortunately, in 2022, it attracted concern because of a polycrisis of climate, economic, and political shocks upending the febrile regional stability. This essay, taking an Indian perspective, derives motivation from the tumultuous year to advocate renewed efforts at regional integration. It relies on a review of literature on this vexed question, discussing the ontological contours of regional integration in International Relations and South Asia's identity, tracing the impact of bilateral ties of India with its neighbours in the region on this politically disjointed but geographically and historically united unit. The essay discusses two kinds of challenges: first, those that attend nearly all regions, viz. riparian and boundary disputes; and second, challenges like ethno-religious polarisation and the acrimonious legacy of the Partition, which are unique to the region. It tries to conclude on an optimistic note, underscoring the few successful efforts from India at peaceful cooperation to face shared challenges, adopting them as templates for integration.

***Keywords:*** South Asia, Regional Integration, Indian Foreign Policy, SAARC, Bilateral Relations.

## Introduction

In 2022, South Asia, even with conservative and understated statements that punctuate diplomatic communication, was in the eye of the storm. Whereas the region has bled in the polarisation affected by religious extremism and terrorism, the previous year saw the fallout of more urgent, novel, yet no less structural devils plaguing the region. 1/3rd of Pakistan was effaced during the cataclysmic floods, costing the exchequer over \$30 billion (The World Bank Group, 2022). The Sri Lankan economy collapsed, convulsing it into popular mobilisation against political and military elites. The heretofore rock-solid Awami League dispensation was shaken by public discontentment over its crackdown on the opposition and attempts at skulduggery in the scheduled general election this year (Molla, 2022).

If instability and unpredictability were the most oft-employed terms referencing South Asia, the absence of a unified front was a common worryment. Emerging from the embers of British imperialism, sharing a heritage stretching to the Indus Valley civilisation, encompassing common customs and challenges, South Asia is slated to be consequential: the world's most populous sub-region, hosting 1.8 billion people (World Population Review, 2023); a pivot to Central, Southeast, and West Asia; and promising an economic miracle with a growth of 7.4% (Asian Development Bank, 2022). It is poised to conjoin best practices across the region to ensure human security, except that intractable territorial, riparian, ideological, and economic disputes among the States have clouded their vision.

This essay will seek to analyse the world's least integrated region by first studying the contours of Indian foreign policy, the largest State and aspirational great power in the region, thereby proceeding to a brief overview of India's bilateral relations with its neighbours in the region, linking them to the causes of the fraught project of integration/cooperation in South Asia, and prospects against this norm.

## Regional Integration: Contours

A brief detour to the concept of regional integration is unavoidable, which thrives in interdependence liberalism. Haas defines integration as the process whereby 'political actors are persuaded to shift their loyalties . . . toward a new centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states' (Obydenkova, 2008). David Mitrany's functionalist theory of integration is based on enduring peace in transnational technical and economic collaboration. Ernest Haas propounded the neofunctionalist theory of integration of the inevitable "spill-over" of functionalism into political integration. Keohane and Nye Jr. conceptualised the evolving nature of complex interdependence, wherein conditions of "low politics" of welfare outstrip realpolitik, military power is left redundant, and the State's power disperses to transnational and non-state actors.

Regionalism is a union of neoliberal and realist ideas—securing material interests and a balance of power through cooperation. While neoliberals underscore the declining transaction costs, peace, and information exchange, realists posit that integrated regions are the culmination of the egotistical State's quest for stability in an anarchic

world system. Though approached from distinct vantage points, regionalism, stretching from the Hellenic League to the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has secured citizens, supported common defence and foreign policy, erasure of mutual suspicion, and impelled closer economic and trade convergences, often coalescing into a customs union (e.g.: Gulf Cooperation Council or the GCC) or common market (e.g.: European Union or the EU).

## Drivers of Indian Foreign Policy towards South Asia

A presumption of hegemony owing to its geographical, demographic, and economic vastness vis-à-vis its neighbours informs India's[1] response to South Asian integration. Throughout the political spectrum, prescriptions to obtain this historical promise of preponderance are at variance; but if the telos of India's grand strategy is geopolitical revisionism—restoring India's lost primacy as a global power—a peaceful, integrated, and economically vibrant neighbourhood under India's leadership figures prominently.

Indian foreign policy toward the neighbourhood, in particular, is a dependent variable of national interests: for India, they range from the protection of sovereignty, which is immutably significant, owing to India's colonial past; promotion of economic opportunities through openings for trade and commerce; and, of late, projection of soft power[2].

More dated frames of reference can be recovered from the *Shantiparva*, where Bhishma opines on the impermanence of friends and enemies pitted against interests. Indic strategic thought concretises with Kautilyan *Rajamandala* in his *Arthashastra* (circa 3rd century BC), considering inevitable politics of hedging, suspicion, and offensive defence against the neighbour (*ari*), the first of the many concentric circles that surround the *vijigsu*. Based on power equations, the nature of the ideal policy, motivations of actors, and chance factors, they may pursue a policy of *sandhi*, *vigraha*, *asana*, *yana*, *samshraya*, or *dwaidhibhava*[3].

Policies have also been shaped by tangibles: common land frontiers with all South Asian neighbours and sea frontiers with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, both of which have provided the region insularity to develop a distinctive identity and sea lanes of communication for the exchange of goods and ideas; India inherited not only the largest military and ammunition from the colonial regime but also its outlook toward the small Himalayan states like Nepal and Bhutan as buffers against China. Jawaharlal Nehru inspired India's (foreign and) neighbourhood policy by concocting a mix of his idealism, opposition to racism, and socio-economic transformation on "socialistic" lines, with realism, compelling him to see South Asia as the exclusive sphere of influence for India[4]. Envisaged in the crucible of the Cold War, it privileged non-alignment and Panchsheel[5].

With Indira Gandhi, South Asia became an area of dominance, and India's outlook, jaded by the wars in the 60s, became hyper-realist. Though Indira exercised a soft hand with Nepal and Sri Lanka, the

domestic environment impelled her to launch a successful campaign for the independence of East Pakistan in 1971, decisively swinging the power equation with Pakistan in India's favour. However, with the Gujral Doctrine and Modi's Neighbourhood First policy in the neoliberal era, India is both militarily and economically capable to be the provider of the region, envisioning a relationship of mutual benefit for trade and connectivity. It is more conciliatory, to conserve trust and regional integrity[6].

## **India's Bilateral Relations with South Asian Countries**

The transfiguration of these principles into policy will be briefly analysed by looking into India's bilateral ties. India and Bhutan are well integrated, their ties governed by the Treaty of Friendship (1949), based on Panchsheel but that had, till 2007, accommodated India's predominance in Bhutan's diplomatic engagements. They've synergised security cooperation: Bhutan expelled ULFA militants in 2004; India neutralised a Chinese incursion in Doklam in 2017. The Jaldakha Agreement epitomises techno-financial assistance from India in hydropower, though, Bhutan owes 68% (Ministry of Finance, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2021) debt to India and is at the wrong end of a trade deficit.

Since Solih's Presidency, India and the Maldives have rediscovered warmth, with Solih following an India-first policy. He has undone the the ghosts of the Yameen Presidency, when the Maldives had tilted

into China's zone, endorsed the docking of China's Navy at Maldivian ports, and bandwagoned atop the BRI. India was responsive to Abdullah Gayoom's plea to neutralise an attempted coup in 1988; even today, it coordinates with Malé in the IORA and pledged credit lines worth over 100 million dollars to build climate-resilient infrastructure (Moorthy, 2022). It has integrated its oceanographic radar systems. However, the archipelago is gripped by a debt trap, apart from an Islamist insurgency, behind the fringe India Out Campaign.

India's ties with Sri Lanka have been hostage to their domestic politics: India had to walk the tightrope between Tamil sentiments and bilateral ties with Lankans during the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgency. The Indira-Sirima Pact evinced India's accommodativeness, accepting 600,000 Tamils, rendered stateless by the Sinhala-Only Act. India also ceded Kuchhaitivu to Sri Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi dispatched the infamous Indian Peace-keeping Force to Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE under the Gandhi-Jayawardene Pact. India had partnered with the US and Japan to provide relief after the Boxing Day tsunami. During the economic meltdown, it extended \$4.5 billion (Gupta, 2022) in direct assistance, currency swaps, and credit line transfers. However, China looms large on the Lankan horizon, with Sri Lanka in a debt trap of the BRI, losing the Hambantota Port to the Chinese. It cancelled the Eastern terminal project of India and Japan on China's bidding and has accused India of intervening in the 2015 elections.

China looms larger at Kathmandu, with which New Delhi had inked an archaic Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950, envisioning a relationship interpreted by Baburam Bhattarai as one of imperialism (Jha, 2014). After the ascension of King Mahendra, Nepal cosied with Beijing, signing a secret intelligence- and arms-sharing pact in the 1980s; it has pledged multi-billion dollar projects in Nepalese services and infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative. India's imposition of economic blockade in 1989 and 2015 jeopardised the "roti-beti ka rishta," plunging the Nepalese economy into China's orbit. Besides the Kurtha-Jayanagar and Janakpur railway links, India has contributed little in connectivity and has used access to Kolkata Port as a trump card to coerce Nepalese leaders to do its bidding. China has, meanwhile, become the largest ODA partner to Nepal.

India also kindles nationalist responses in Bangladesh, where Mukherji (2007) cautions the "gratitude" for the military and material succour in the liberation war has worn off. Allchin (2018) goes a step further to elucidate the insecurity of Bangladeshi forces and politicians in India taking a protagonist's position in the story of their nationhood. Therefore, they desire a degree of autonomy from India, never concretely or empirically defined, which surrounds it on three sides and is the upper riparian State for rivers like Brahmaputra and Teesta.

Due to a string of Islamist military autocracies till 1991, it has become a feasting ground for extremist Islamism. No permanent arrangement on river-water-sharing has been inked, and India has allegedly diverted waters from the Ganges by the Farakka barrage.



The onset of the Hasina era has arrested the decline in Indo-Bangladesh ties: her Awami League has revived Bangladesh's secular character, and Indian and Bangladeshi intelligence has collaborated against Islamist outfits. During summit-level talks in Dhaka in 2015, the landmark land boundary agreement assuaged Bangladesh. During Hasina's visit, a Memorandum of Understanding on using Kushiara's water was inked; rail-road connectivity has been facilitated between Dhaka and Shillong, and Dhaka and Kolkata; and Bangladesh has opened Chittagong and Mongla for sea trade.

On the other hand, Myanmar and Afghanistan desire closer integration with India. Bilateral ties with Naypyitaw and Kabul have ebbed and waned owing to domestic circumstances; moreover, historically, both have been at the periphery of India's preoccupation. With the onset of mujahideen and Taliban in the '80s, it lost the plot to Zia's Pakistan. Between 2001 and 2020, India, handing over \$3 billion in aid (Chandra, 2020), was the largest regional donor to Kabul, and has built dams, the Parliament, hospitals, and rehabilitation centres. In 2011, the relations were upgraded to a Strategic Partnership. India and the Taliban regime are also making overtures, as India has re-opened its embassy in Kabul. Though Naypyitaw and Delhi have an agreement to promote investment as well as a border trade agreement, they suffer from the lack of infrastructure; bilateral trade is a mere \$12.8 million (Pant, 2016). Relations declined as Myanmar went closer to China under Ne Win, as India remained reticent on democratisation.

India's most adversarial relations are with Pakistan, bred in post-Partition riots, and four wars over J&K and East Pakistan. Islamabad's sponsorship of terrorism and separatism since the 1980s has been acknowledged by the United Nations Security Council. Pakistan is in a fruitless quest for parity with India because of which anti-India nationalism has been stoked across party lines. Pakistan suspended bilateral trade over the revocation of Articles 370 and 35A; India has lately threatened to rethink the Indus Water Treaty, a rare partnership between the two enemies. All transport between the countries has been annulled, including the Samjhauta and Thar Expresses, and the Lahore-Delhi and Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus links. The India-Pakistan border was described as the most dangerous place by Bush.

## **Challenges to Regional Integration**

Since South Asia lacks a regional identity, this sweeping overview was geared toward spreading in relief the imperious factors clipping potential convergences in South Asia, which will now be analysed broadly, from a regional perspective. Prima facie, India is hounded by what Shyam Saran refers to as a challenge of proximity: each country shares legacies with India and is at pains to craft an idiosyncratic identity; those, like Bangladesh, who have succeeded at imagining a national myth settle securely with New Delhi, while others, like Pakistan and Nepal, are on tenterhooks. India's development assistance, secondly, cannot portend a level playing field owing to the irreconcilable political economy and demography across the region. India's economy, at \$3.18 trillion, is the region's largest, followed by Bangladesh, at \$418 billion. India has managed to

diversify and digitise its economy; the same hasn't been replicated across the region.

Resultantly, intra-regional trade<sup>[7]</sup>, an indicator of regional integration, is among the lowest, at 6.5%; well-integrated regions like East Asia peak at ~35%. South Asians, due to absent trade networks, are trigger-happy, not having raised the opportunity cost of conflict. The share has varied from 5.1% of India to over 50% of Nepal, owing to differential access to global markets. The South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), inked in Colombo, prepared the ground for the South Asian Free Trade Area, enforced in 2006; but neither addressed the needs of Least Developed Countries nor did away with sensitive lists for thorough trade liberalisation. Instead, members competed against each other for greater market share: India's notion of a customs union by 2020 /'30 was thus stillborn.

Economic integration is far-fetched because South Asia, churned in acrimony in 1947-8, is composed of sovereignty hawks who despise forgoing a fragment of state power for regional good. South Asia has hard borders, belying a millennium of shared culture; frontiers (e.g.: Northeast India and Rakhine) are hyper-militarised and seen not as bridges but barbed wires against external threats. Karim (2014) argues in light of the Hegemony Stability Theory—that since South Asia is contested by India and Pakistan, smaller States like Bangladesh and Nepal have been rendered insecure, and thus the idea of SAARC was also mooted by President Zia-ur Rehman in 1985, the first meeting materialising at Dhaka, headquartered at Kathmandu.

Regional integration presupposes a benevolent hegemon, but in South Asia, India, notwithstanding its interventions in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Doklam, has been unwilling to shoulder that responsibility. Its geopolitics has been Sino- and Pakistan-centric; even in soft politics, Indian promises have met with bureaucratic delays. Despite an Eminent Persons' Group, India hasn't reworked the Treaty of Friendship with Nepal to make it equitable; India's touted hydropower cooperation with Bhutan over Pnatsangchu & Kholongchu has run into financially unfeasible delays; and India has been the least accommodative in lifting NTBs to comply with SAFTA (Nayak, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, India is cast as a power-hungry "big brother" to fan nationalist vote banks in domestic politics of neighbouring States, e.g.: BNP's Islamism in Bangladesh, Pakistan People's Party in Pakistan, Maoists in Nepal, or Abdullah Yameen in the Maldives[9]. In India, too, federal relations have impinged on the Centre's dealing with these countries: for instance, Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been unwilling to compromise on Teesta (Shankar, 2017). This is not to deny the emerging reality of increasing salience of sub-national units, including states and cities, in directing a country's foreign affairs to extract something beneficial for themselves in the bargain. It is futile, for instance, to envision connectivity between India and Bhutan and keep Assam and Sikkim out of the picture (ibid). China, a Communist autocracy, meanwhile, outscores India in efficiency: it has separated trade and ODA from politics, has blanketed the region with BRI, and its trade with South Asia is double of India (\$59 billion vs \$30 billion).

## Bright Spots

But there are silver linings in this dismal picture. The SAARC failed due to bilateral disputes and the non-compliance with Article X, but the littoral States of the Bay of Bengal have formed the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC); with most democracies and emerging economies, interdependencies on trade and investment have been readily identified. Unlike the SAARC, primarily based on strategic interests, BIMSTEC locates 14 sectors critical for human security, like climate change and fisheries, with actionable objectives and leads countries to utilise their sectional expertise. Headquartered in Dhaka, it also encompasses the BIMSTEC Business and Transport Working Group. Similarly, after the Kathmandu Summit of the SAARC, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) went ahead with operationalising the passenger and cargo protocol, harmonising customs clearance and transit procedures, and facilitating multiple entry/exit points under the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement to incentivise trade and tourism.

The SAARC had cultivated enduring consensus on issues of human security and trade by signing the Convention on Prevention of Terrorism (1987) and Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002). The ceasefire at LoC in 2021 excited a ray of hope. Notwithstanding their mutual rivalry, India and Pakistan partner in international forums, recently at COP-28[9] and the WTO Ministerial[10] (Mishra, 2022). The potential for cultural and Track-III diplomacy is immense: Indian and Pakistani public intellectuals

interact despite harshness in hard politics; Bollywood, cricket, and common festivals bind the region together. The Buddhist circuit spread around Bhutan-Bangladesh-India-Nepal (BBIN) and the Kartarpur Corridor are examples of connectivity fostered through religion.

## Conclusion

To conclude, South Asia, with a fledgling transport connectivity, under-developed intra-regional trade, and geopolitical tempers, is the least integrated region of the world. India is in a peculiar situation—raring to take the mantle of a great power but shaky in its neighbourhood. Karim (2014) says the ethical imperative to foster connectivity needs to be matched with economic pragmatism, and transport links will function as feeders for supply chains and amity. While riparian and border disputes occur in all regions, Partition legacies and religious extremism are idiosyncratic to South Asia. As long as interdependencies in the economy (e.g.: the South Asian Free Trade Agreement), healthcare (e.g.: SAARC satellite), and healthcare (e.g.: supply chains for vaccines) are not created from a regional platform like SAARC, South Asia won't find common solutions and veer its way towards crisis. India cannot shrug responsibility from playing a key role in such efforts. However, it needs to check the discordant notes from its policy circles, media, and the public at large, all of which emit a pernicious air to its otherwise benevolent ventures. India, in a critical analysis, stands guilty of wielding imperious instruments like economic blockades to influence policies.

The diversification of international relations of its neighbours should be seen as an opportunity for propping extra-regional cooperative frameworks, rather than, despite the efforts of history, preying on its region of influence by extra-regional powers. India inherited the colonial legacy of hegemonizing South Asian affairs, but if it is any serious about leading the Global South, the sooner it sheds this skin, the better. should deploy its successes in running a federal democracy in the neighbourhood, ached with vicissitudes of identity and representation. Any project of regional integration should be decoupled from core geopolitical issues and instead concentrated around human security because if the world's most populous sub-region fails, the world will fail.

## Endnotes

[1] To respond to the demands of the question, this essay shall restrict itself to India's foreign policy and geostrategy vis-à-vis South Asia, without sauntering in the otherwise bustling corridors of the foreign policies of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal et al, which occasionally coincide but are often sharply at odds with India's.

[2] Joseph S Nye Jr.'s terminology, whereas EH Carr referred to it as power over opinion. See Sikri (2020) for this incisive problematisation

[3] Peace, war, neutrality, coercion, alliance, and duplicity respectively

[4] Despite being a practical idealist, Nehruvian stance toward the region was realist and occasionally hegemonic, notwithstanding, as

Dr. Raja Mohan has argued, the paucity of resources to find solutions for the region.

[5] Mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence.

[6] Terms like Gujral Doctrine, Neighbourhood First, and Panchsheel, when applied to South Asia—and elsewhere—are ideal types; the praxis of foreign policy is a negotiation of prevailing circumstances, domestic pressures, and principles. As the following sections will hint, Indian policy has been rather ad hoc with bare fundamentals intact.

[7] See Appendix

[8] Pragmatism supplants anti-India rhetoric once these parties assume power: Prachanda approached the Indian Ambassador when embattled by cracks in his coalition in his first term; PPP, when in power between 2008 and 2013, had vociferously advocated for trade with India.

[9] Chaired by Pakistan, the G77, also crucially represented by India acting as a bridge between the Global North and South, attained the right to loss and damages in an otherwise disappointing Conference of Parties at Sharm-el-Sheikh.



[10] India and Pakistan, along with countries like South Africa and Uruguay, have demanded flexibility in IPRs, especially in the pharmaceutical sector.

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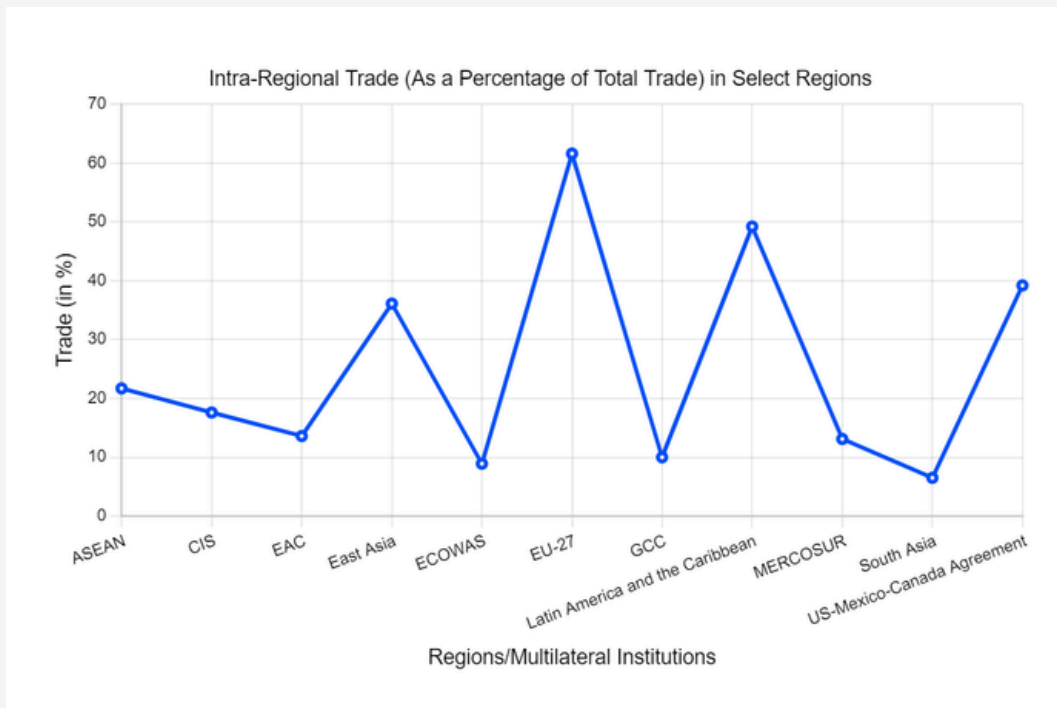
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## Appendix



*Data sourced from the 2021 International Trade Statistics Yearbook, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations; line graph designed by self.*