

India's Role In South Asia: A Rising Power's Impact On Regional Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to observe the evolution of the South Asian Region to a more holistic and advanced area while highlighting the role of India in managing the volatile situations and inter-state relations. In South Asian nations, the disruptive effects of imperial penetration on indigenous social structures are still felt. But, the regional cooperation groups have been essential in enlarging the field of influence and improving the political, cultural, and economic ties. India plays a major role in influencing the power dynamics and future of the area due to its central location in South Asia. This research paper examines the crystallisation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India's hegemony and the China issue. It also identifies the loopholes in the cooperative framework and depicts the journey from self-deprecation to self-realisation over the years. As the paper unfolds, it aims to study India's relationships with its neighbours, the success or failure of SAARC, and ways to mitigate the obstacles in the path of South Asian integration. This paper deals with two elements, firstly, how India's rising power status affects the multi ethnic South Asian Region and secondly, the constraints and a transformative way forward to make the region peaceful and prosperous.

KEY WORDS

India, SAARC, China, Pakistan, Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Economy, Policy, Recommendations

LITERATURE REVIEW

India is often perceived as a regional power¹ as it claims to be in charge of more resources than its adjacent nations. Neo-Realist academics stated that having more material wealth inevitably translates into having more control over neighbours, meaning the unequal distribution of hard power resources lead to being a regional power, following the principle of sovereign equality and non-interference.

¹ material and ideational aspects

South Asia is a sizable regional bloc with enormous potential, but it hasn't accomplished much in terms of economic and political integration. Despite participating in trade, India has long been considered as a barrier² in the growth of the smaller states in the area, forcing them to establish contacts with the outside world. To protect the region's shared interests and transform ambitions into more open systems of peaceful coexistence, supranational organisations like SAARC were established. Later, the dynamic advantages of SAFTA³ supported restructuring of economies. India's involvement becomes crucial in the shape of large relief packages and inclusive policies for the recovery and improvement of these nations. A stable economy and the growth of entrepreneurship might aid in lowering the unemployment rates of these lesser-developed nations. India no longer views South Asia as its exclusive backyard and has accepted nations from outside the region as observers in SAARC. Within the SAARC, it seems that the principle of social justice has come to dominate over the ideal of social protection. Elaborated by Adam Smith and Amartya Sen, social development is quite central to sociological understandings of poverty and SAARC. K. Subrahmanyam's article titled 'India's Relations with her Neighbours', describes how Uncertainty is a defining characteristic of South Asian politics and the importance of India in uniting the neighbours, by respecting the values of freedom, rights, secularism, democracy, federalism and linguistic autonomy.

SOUTH ASIA: ROOTS OF COMMONALITY

South Asia is a place that offers both great risk and amazing potential, a vast and expanding market paves way for a better future despite the region's struggles with international terrorism, nuclear conflict, social unrest, and humanitarian crises. The history of countries like India, Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal is marked by the brutal past of Colonial rule, weak civil society and state conflicts. Due to jealousy and rivalry, the momentum of peaceful relations could not be sustained since policy measures lacked coherence and continuity. To combat the neoliberal economic world order, a cooperative security mechanism was required in the area. The South Asian area as a whole is distinguished by shared cultural and civilisational linkages due to similar

² high levels of general protection have hampered commerce

³ diminish interstate barriers to economic cooperation and trade, aimed to facilitate cross-border shipment of goods, to promote fair trade approaches and to implement mechanisms for just and equal benefits.

history, but it also suffers from political turmoil, separatist movements and geopolitical issues, causing ethnic unrest. This led to increase in SAARC's capacity and readiness to consider options for creating complementary, win-win economic arrangements. It needs to develop a workable structure and realistic terms of reference for substantive collaboration based on mutual benefit.

A TALE OF TWO RIVAL NATIONS- INDIA AND PAKISTAN

India and Pakistan share a bloody past, since Partition both the countries have faced many problems even when collaborating for cooperation. India's troubles in bilateral relations start from its relationship with Pakistan. The issue of Kashmir remains to be one of the most controversial issues till date. The recent Uri and Pulwama' attacks have only made matters worse. There have been ups and downs due to territorial and maritime disputes, accusations of cross-border terrorism, disagreements over the sharing of river waters, and curbs on trade.

The foundation of Pakistan on the basis of religion was regarded as a counter-model to the secular Indian state, the 'unending conflict' has fostered the supremacy of Pakistan's army vis-à-vis civilian governments leading to political instability⁴ and declining democracy which has further aggravated their hostile relations, hindering development.

With new governments,⁵ there was hope of economic improvements, but due to its conflict with India, Pakistan started to intensify its political, economic, and military relations with China. The country often refers to China as an 'all weather friend' and describes the bilateral relations as 'deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountain'. This hostility has been an obstacle in the path of progress of SAARC. The accomplishment of Track II strategy among Pakistan and India has led to territorial improvement, but due to Pakistan's recent economic crisis, high inflation, and declining economy, India now places a higher priority on border security and has increased its military readiness. As a result, economic relations between the two countries are still buried. The escalating insurrections and

⁴ political unrest after the ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan through a no-confidence motion in April 2022

⁵ Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan in 2013 and Narendra Modi in India in 2014

separatist movements in Balochistan, which Pakistan accuses India of fomenting, have also deteriorated their relations.

REFUGEE CRISIS- RELATIONS WITH BANGLADESH

India's military interference in the civil war between East and West Pakistan had resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. With the inception of Bangladesh, there was a huge flux of refugees that came to India to face less discrimination and live a safe life. The discussion over Bangladesh's national identity is closely connected with its relations with India that includes the Bengali heritage, language, and culture. After the military coup in 1975, the relationship changed, Bangladesh opened up its economy to western countries, China, and the Gulf states in order to reduce its dependence on India. It promoted the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism, emphasising the role of religion, i.e. Islam, as opposed to the idea of Bengali nationalism.

Bangladesh occupies a key place in India's Neighbourhood First policy and is the 6th largest trade partner of India having duty free access on all tariff lines except tobacco and alcohol under South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) since 2011. Both the countries need greater cooperation in the Power and Energy Sector to harness their resources efficiently. Tourism⁶ also generates revenue for their economies. They are also a part of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORA) which has strengthened their relations. However, there still remain major unresolved issues such as river water disputes⁷, terrorism, aiding illegal immigrants, and drug trades that must be addressed as it has serious implications for its resources and national security.

The ideological battle over national identity was reflected in the recent controversy when the Rohingya refugees originally from Myanmar started infiltrating into India through Bangladesh. The National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is expected to deter future migrants from entering India illegally, has also triggered a major concern in Bangladesh. Growing Chinese Influence in Bangladesh and its

⁶ According to the Ministry of Tourism, Bangladesh accounted for the largest share of foreign tourist arrivals in India in 2020

⁷ Teesta River water sharing

active involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has aggravated the problems. There is a need to enhance connectivity in the region, shift focus towards the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), tackle the Refugee Crisis and Counter China's Influence.

A PEEP INTO NATURE'S BEAUTY- INDIA-BHUTAN AND INDIA-MALDIVES FRIENDSHIP

India has evolved harmonious relations virtually free of bilateral problems with Bhutan and Maldives. Bhutan, the kingdom of happiness, despite being unequal in political and economic terms, has had special relations formalised by the treaty of perpetual peace and friendship signed in 1949. India's determination to refrain from meddling in Bhutan's domestic affairs has rendered their relations amicable. Bhutan has committed to import its weapons from or via India on defence-related topics through a mutual agreement that established a bilateral free trade system.

Being a landlocked, underdeveloped country, Bhutan depends heavily on India for its economic assistance⁸. Majority of Bhutan's external revenue is collected from the sale of electricity to India and it remains a major hub for tourism, though it is seeking to expand its commercial interactions with other countries also. The warm relations have been characterised by strong cultural ties, as both countries are predominantly Buddhist. Bhutan serves as a crucial buffer state for India's security interests, recent border conflicts and China's aggression has sparked worries that Bhutan may be drifting away from its longtime ally, India. Bhutan has been negotiating with China over its territorial conflicts, which can endanger India's security. The problems of trade could be resolved by economic and strategic cooperation, visa-free movement of peoples from both countries, Education and Skill Development⁹.

The cordial relationship between India and the Maldives is multifaceted. They share ancient ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial ties. Since 1965, India has enjoyed diplomatic ties with

⁸ India fully financed Bhutan's first two five-year plans and has undertaken several development projects.

⁹ According to All India Surveys of Higher Education (AISHE), the number of Bhutanese students receiving tertiary education in India declined from 2,468 in 2012-13 to 1,827 in 2020-21

the Maldives, a treasure island renowned for its abundant natural beauty. The agreement to define their maritime border was achieved in 1976. India has repeatedly pledged to uphold the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Maldives, despite their inherent weakness and vulnerability. Maldives has reciprocated by respecting India's regional security sensitivities, while India remained receptive to the small state's security needs and provided prompt military support.¹⁰ India has extended a variety of economic and technical assistance to help in the development infrastructure of Maldives.

The threat of transnational crime, India Out' Campaign, radicalisation, terrorism, China's influence and drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean emphasises that coordination between India and Maldives in the field of defence and Indo-Pacific security is vital for peace and stability. The agreements on connectivity, cybersecurity, and disaster management should pave the way for growth.

A BATTLE OVER IDENTITIES- INDIA AND SRI LANKA

The process of nation-building in Sri Lanka was directly correlated with its interactions with India. The Colombo administration disenfranchised the so-called Indian Tamil minority soon after Sri Lanka gained its independence in 1948, sparking a dispute between India and Sri Lanka¹¹. Later the Indo-Sri Lankan accord changed the country's administrative structure and served as the foundation for the first deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) which was strongly resisted by the Buddhist-nationalist People's Liberation Front, who launched a violent uprising forcing the Indian forces to leave in 1989.

Bilateral economic ties with Sri Lanka were strengthened as part of India's reorientation of its South Asia strategy, which resulted in the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and military cooperation. The India-Sri Lanka Foundation is an intergovernmental project that also seeks to improve civil society interactions between the two nations' younger generations while also advancing scientific, technological, educational, and cultural collaboration. For military and commercial purposes, the Indian Ocean is a crucial waterway for the safety and security of their communication sea lanes. After

¹⁰ In September 2002, India offered to train and equip the Maldivian security forces in coastal defence.

¹¹ The conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils grew worse.

Sri Lanka's economic collapse, India was its first bilateral creditor¹², providing formal finance guarantees to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), reiterating its "neighbourhood first" guiding concept.

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM- DEBATE OVER BELIEF - INDIA- NEPAL

Nepal is strategically significant for India in relation to China because of its location in the Himalayas. The treaty of peace and friendship of 1950 and secret arrangements with the monarchy gave India extensive influence in Nepal. Relations with India continued to dominate internal politics after the country became democratic. The 1991 constitution designated Nepal as a Hindu state, reflecting the country's strong ties to India. But there were broad concerns in various parties about the country's political and economic dependency on India and also the debate over the origin of Buddhism and Hinduism. India mediated successfully in Nepal's civil war between the monarchy, the political parties, and the Maoist rebels. Both countries have elaborate cooperation on issues of trade and security, investment, defence and multilateral partnerships¹³. The most recent instance of Nepal's tense relationship with India happened after the new constitution was adopted in September 2015, which closed the country's border with India¹⁴. But, recently both the countries have agreed to boost their economic and developmental ties.

KABULIWALA- HISTORY OF CULTURAL TIES- INDIA- AFGHANISTAN

India and Afghanistan share mutual respect, cultural, religious, economic, and political links. Afghanistan is now in a dire condition and runs the risk of becoming a "failed state" if the security crisis is not taken more seriously. In addition to using military force to combat the threat of a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, rapid development and rebuilding efforts are also required to change the country's social and economic institutions. India backed Afghanistan's admission in SAARC since it

¹²<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-will-try-to-extend-all-possible-cooperation-to-sri-lanka-sitharaman-7875944/>

¹³ BBIN, SAARC etc.

¹⁴ Some members of the Nepali government blamed India for the demonstrations, the battle between Nepali factions transformed into a bilateral one.

was redefining its foreign policy goals in the area and attempted to utilise its growing economic and military might to exert more control over its strategic environment.

The present instability in Afghanistan is not good news for India, which views a stable, democratic, and prosperous Afghanistan as necessary for its own as well as the region's social stability. The Taliban militants who have been repeatedly targeting Indian nationals¹⁵, emboldened by its non-response, have now trained their guns directly at the Indian State. There are growing voices in India that it should support its economic and diplomatic activities in Afghanistan with an increase in its military presence there.

Afghanistan's membership of SAARC was therefore also considered as an important milestone towards the goal of peace and prosperity in the country. Its rich base of unexplored resources will benefit in developing its economy. Indian investments in Afghanistan's healthcare, education, and agriculture sectors have played a crucial role in supporting the country's advancement, aiming to bolster connectivity and trade in the region. In the context of security cooperation, the two nations have a shared interest in combating extremism and maintaining stability in the region. India's support of the Afghan resistance, sovereignty, providing Infrastructure Development and Humanitarian Assistance during times of crises has solidified its position as a reliable partner.

The conflict-ridden Afghanistan should have been given enough time to enable itself to achieve stability and comprehend SAARC, but its hasty membership and lack of appropriate circumstances have presented obstacles for SAARC. It could have provided provisional membership followed by the permanent membership through an incremental approach. The economic and geopolitical interests of SAARC cleared the path for Afghanistan's admission which presents more difficulties than advantages.

¹⁵ India is part of the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan

OBSERVER COUNTRIES IN SAARC-

SAARC is often called a "talk fest" that places more emphasis on rhetoric than on actual practises. Despite the difficulties that would inevitably arise, it was decided to broaden SAARC in order to strengthen ties with nations beyond the region and with international organisations by granting them observer status. China, Japan, EU, South Korea, Iran, USA, Australia, Myanmar and Mauritius were all welcomed as SAARC observers during the summits.

To create a systematised game plan for engagement with other local groups and international organisations, SAARC nations required support and assistance with resources, training, and innovation. This outside assistance propels SAARC towards a better future in the social and financial spheres and state cooperation within South Asia. SAARC Charter specifies that it was established to promote social progress, increase collective self-reliance and interact with other IOs, but it lacked a defined expansion plan. The Observers were to be involved in productive, demand-driven, and objective project-based collaboration in key areas such as communication, connectivity, public health etc.

SAARC- A SUCCESS OR FAILURE in promoting regional cooperation

Extensive corruption, democratic crisis, unbalanced intra and interstate development, and an increase in ethnic conflicts jeopardise the South Asian System. Bangladesh first proposed the idea of a regional organisation like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985, which claimed that cooperation in "low politics" areas (economic, social, and technical cooperation) leads to cooperation in "high politics" areas (political cooperation).

A wider regional cooperation was for India's national interest and also as a strategy to keep the neighbourhood peaceful. The nuclear tests raised a sense of insecurity amongst the smaller countries in the region and reflected India's power aspirations. Around this time India¹⁶ was not in a position to initiate any regional cooperation due to the poor relations with its neighbours. Finally, in 1985

¹⁶ India initially maintained a passive approach to deal with the sceptic neighbourhood.

SAARC was formed making it India's first regional organisation with the goals to advance the welfare of the people to realise their full potential and speed up economic, social, and cultural development in the region. They also aimed to strengthen South Asia's collective self-reliance, foster mutual trust, understanding and encourage active assistance. It stipulated that all decisions must be reached via negotiation and diplomacy with the agreement of every member state. The strained ties between India and Pakistan, have prevented any productive cooperation, and SAARC's track record in terms of institutional growth and programme execution has been appalling. The major obstacle which hinders growth of security cooperation of SAARC is ambiguity in defining the South Asian region and its disallowance of debate on divisive bilateral topics.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is seen as a representation of the South Asian peoples' commitment to cooperation, to solving their shared problems in a spirit of friendship, trust and to establishing an order based on respect, equity, and peace. It has established an institutional structure in which meetings are held on a regular basis which paints an image of diversity inside unity. Given the socioeconomic and poverty challenges, SAARC integration can help with political stability, assuring overall progress of the region and individual members.

Earnest Hass defines regional cooperation as the "process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new larger centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing"

SAARC should draw ideas from the EU and ASEAN to formulate its policies and create a suitable platform for collaboration to overcome budgetary constraints and security issues. The SAARC summit's irregularities reveal a lack of South Asia subregional connection, which poses a major challenge.

INDIA- PARTNER OR HEGEMON?

Regional organisations' primary goal is to integrate the region in order to advance national security and the economy, which has become a protruding characteristic of international politics. India's gateway to a full platform was the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It has been

instrumental in bringing the member nations closer together by holding several summits. Even if internal conflicts have hampered this organisation's overall advancement, its desire to further regional integration have given rise to optimism for its future development.

India was initially wary of SAARC because it viewed it as a forum for regional pressure on India known as "India bashing." India, having the greatest socio economic wealth, would have been accused of sabotaging a novel initiative for regional cooperation if it had not participated. It is the dominant nation¹⁷ in the area, bordered by the smaller nations and water bodies, and most South Asian governments apprehensively view it as a regional hegemon. Analysis using Dependency Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein India is the "core" while its neighbours are the "periphery". Economic backwardness, female foeticide, illiteracy, hunger, increasing inflation, starving deaths, and unemployment plague the majority of regional states. India's economic, military, and geographical size significantly outweigh those of its neighbours, keeping the balance of power decisively in India's favour. As a result of the persistent fear of psychosis among the states in the region, India must take the role of an "elder brother" in order to help South Asia develop towards a cooperative security system and foster mutual confidence.

India's regional strategy purposefully includes soft power components, also known as "co-optive power," which is the capacity to influence others' preferences in order to achieve your goals by not using force for people to comply. 'Its culture, its political principles, and its foreign policy' are factors that contribute to a nation's soft power, claims Nye. But India's foreign policy's inclination towards realpolitik altered its soft power. Christian Wagner (2010) claims, India has "defensive soft power"¹⁸.

India's Aspirations To Be A Regional Power: From Security To Market

India has tried to change its strategic environment to suit its own objectives as it has advanced in the global interstate hierarchy. It appears to be a regional power by default in South Asia due to the

¹⁷ Its economy is growing and its democracy is stable.

¹⁸ meaning it doesn't advertise its political system overseas and instead employs soft power to attract foreign investors.

asymmetry of its territory, demographic size, military superiority, and economic potential. However, a deeper examination indicates that India's superior economic and military capabilities have rarely contributed to the attainment of its foreign policy objectives¹⁹. After economic deregulation in 1991, there was emphasis on the idea of non-reciprocity: India was now prepared to make unilateral political and economic concessions to weaker governments. South Asia is now considered as a component of India's economic growth rather than its national security²⁰.

India's position on SAARC is still relatively ambiguous and confusing. However, it is clear that India is interested in assisting in raising living standards and reducing poverty in these pluralistic nations. Regional integration will provide a larger market and also increase scope for trade and energy security. As the only country sharing borders with all neighbours in the region, India must take a cohesive initiative in creating a climate of trust among SAARC members, which would encourage greater commitment to regional cooperation leading to rapid, sustainable, and inclusive growth. South Asia has historically been an interconnected economic, cultural, and environmental region, spanning from Kabul to Chittagong and from Kashmir to Colombo.

South Asian Nation-Building And The Boundaries Of India's Aspirations For Regional Dominance

Nation-building was always seen as a delimitation in relation to India, and was directly linked with the failure to recognise India as the regional hegemon. India's attempts to become a regional force were therefore doomed to failure, both because of internal disagreements over nation-building and issues related to national sovereignty. In opposition to India's regional ambitions, the shared religious, linguistic, and ethnic traditions that unite the area are also at play.

¹⁹ The military victory over Pakistan in 1971 was not followed by a permanent solution of the Kashmir issue, and could not prevent Bangladesh's economic and political realignment after the military coup in 1975.

²⁰ In 2013–2014 more than 80 per cent of India's total loan and aid budget was allocated to its South Asian neighbours, especially Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

India's focus on the development of regional trade led to the South Asian Free Trade Arrangement (SAFTA)²¹ in 1996, but due to national constraints, the agreement resulted in modest improvements and did not cause a significant rise in intra-regional commerce. India lags in both the sale of weapons and investments in vital infrastructure. The coordinated military actions between India and its neighbours, and the current expansion of security cooperation demonstrates that the threats of the South Asian nations have converged.

CONSTRAINTS OF SAARC

1. According to Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations*, SAARC has failed because the nations that make up organisations like the EU and others have the same culture, whereas the countries who make up SAARC have distinct civilizations.
2. The SAARC's member nations have fragile financial systems and are in competition with one another rather than complementing each other.
3. Countries in South Asia have varying political systems, which is another factor in the failure of SAARC. South Asia has not historically been a stronghold of democracy. Example India has democracy, Pakistan has transitional democracy, Nepal has monarchy and presidential system in Sri Lanka.
4. Absence of collective vision, Red tapism, bureaucratic hassles and lack of political will at the leadership level affects the functioning of SAARC in South Asia.
5. The lack of a strong technological foundation, illiteracy, and unemployment impede global expansion in the region.

QUESTION OF CHINA In Relation To India And South Asia

Indian governments never had full potential to pursue their regional power ambitions in South Asia as countries could always play the China card to evade India's influence. Though India's new South Asia

²¹ Tariff concessions, Reciprocity and mutuality of advantages, economic trade, industrial development, Recognition of the special needs of the Least Developed countries etc.

policy with the focus on trade and connectivity improved regional cooperation, China remains an economically more attractive and politically more reliable partner for India's neighbours.

India and China have a long ambivalent bilateral relationship, the contentious issues like the unresolved border issue or China's political, economic, and military support for Pakistan has made the two Asian giants be described by diverging concepts like, 'strategic rivalry', or the 'new great game'.

South Asia has become an area in which India and China have been seeking to gain political and economic influence. India has used different bi- and multilateral strategies to pursue its regional leadership role in South Asia. In contrast, China has concentrated on bilateral relations, in order to expand its traditional focus.

As part of its ideological foreign policy, China supported various militant movements in South Asia and later China's South Asia policy was also aimed at pressuring India. It has been characterised as 'multi-layered and complicated and not necessarily compatible and complementary'. China's attempts to create new access to the Indian Ocean as part of its 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative by building land corridors through Pakistan and Bangladesh will increase the strategic importance of South Asia.

This resulted in controversial discourses and made it impossible for their governments to recognise India's regional power claims. This constellation opened the door for South Asian governments to pursue a policy of internationalisation to get external support in their conflicts with India. There are widespread apprehensions that Chinese infrastructure projects may also be used for military purposes to expand China's role in the Indian Ocean and to 'encircle' India. India has to expand its role as security provider for South Asia as well as for the Indian Ocean region in order to counter the growing Chinese influence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

India- Pakistan- These nations should develop Strategies of Peace and Conflict Resolution for comprehensive Confidence-building measures (CBMs) including communication, constraint, transparency and verification²², Crisis management and nuclear deterrence by using multi track diplomacy²³, and increasing economic cooperation to create a practical framework for stable regional equations. A well designed Monitoring and Evaluation mechanism to track and examine issues like terrorism, undemocratic uprisings, human capital, trends of urbanisation can improve their relations. The opening up of formal channels for commerce can improve interregional trade and lead to mutual confidence between India and Pakistan to collaborate in other areas thereby strengthening economic and political engagements.

India- Nepal- This country stands as India's sole neighbour with a partially open border, promoting smoother trade ties. Addressing economic concerns necessitates heightened awareness about the risks of debt trap diplomacy to avoid trade losses and foster trust in India's economic investments. Engaging in a comprehensive political dialogue can pave the way for collaborative development policies spanning education, healthcare, tourism, and more. Both nations can capitalise on abundant water resources by jointly investing in public-private partnerships for major hydroelectric power projects. International NGOs' joint ventures can facilitate infrastructure, communication, energy, business, and financial inclusion, driving progress.

India- Bangladesh- A multitude of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) spanning space, IT, marine resources, and tourism have enhanced the India-Bangladesh relationship. To bolster their human resources and socio-economic conditions, these densely populated nations should expand their domestic markets by attracting foreign investments. This can be achieved by permitting multinational corporations (MNCs) and international investors to acquire raw materials or engage in a barter system

²² Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, D.C

²³<https://imtdsite.wordpress.com/about/what-is-multi-track-diplomacy/#:~:text=Diamond%20and%20Ambassador%20McDonald%20expanded,by%20track%2Done%20or%20government.>

involving developed goods. Addressing the migration and refugee crisis entails regulated intercountry movement guidelines and the elimination of obsolete policies hindering people-to-people interactions, thereby strengthening cultural and social ties. Furthermore, crafting and enacting a suitable water policy agreement can bring an end to the Teesta river dispute.

India- Afghanistan- The primary focus of collaboration between these two nations should revolve around implementing welfare policies aimed at improving education, ensuring safety from sexual harassment, enhancing representation in public spheres, and eradicating issues like child trafficking and substance abuse. This emphasis on development and progress is vital for vulnerable communities. It's imperative to design specific policies and effectively execute poverty alleviation programs. Internal political dynamics should be improved to guarantee the fulfilment of basic human rights for all citizens. In light of the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, fostering a sense of global community and unity should be promoted by establishing a platform for mutual assistance and idea exchange, fostering greater interconnectedness, and reaffirming the principle of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam."

India- Sri Lanka- The collaborative development efforts between these two countries should encompass a range of measures including the implementation of appropriate fiscal and monetary policies, such as trade enhancements, inflation control, and poverty alleviation schemes. Additionally, vocational programs should be instituted to generate employment, while balancing production and consumption, and bolstering the healthcare infrastructure. Sri Lanka's political and economic system needs a significant overhaul to regain stability and should align with the values embedded in its Constitution. This entails effective execution of resettlement and rehabilitation projects to promote respect for human rights. Furthermore, decentralisation and cooperation with local NGOs and civil society groups are essential to gain a deeper understanding of on-ground realities and foster stronger relations.

India- Bhutan- The defence and tourism sectors hold pivotal positions in the relationship between these nations, and their synergy can be augmented through cultural and educational exchange initiatives. Such programs would enrich knowledge systems and empower the youth to become more informed decision-makers. To resolve the contentious Doklam issue, the bilateral bond between the nations should be strengthened, and economic and political agreements should be incentivized. India should also address Bhutan's concerns regarding hydropower projects and raise awareness of China's debt trap policy. Moreover, efforts should be made to improve internet services and increase infrastructure investments.

India- Maldives- India should prioritise exploring lucrative opportunities for financial growth in its maritime relations and accelerate the completion of projects funded by India to bolster economic advancement in Maldives. Addressing anti-India sentiments within the country is essential, and one effective approach is embracing a Policy of Diversimilarity. This strategy involves frequent bilateral meetings with Maldives to foster open discussions that respect both nations' similarities and differences, leading to consensus on common policy issues. Furthermore, India should channel investments into infrastructure development, creating conditions conducive to youth employability, upliftment, and sustainable growth.

CONCLUSION

India appears to be a regional force in South Asia and will likely play a growing role in the region's future. It has fought and won wars (Pakistan), supported militant groups in their struggle against authoritarian regimes (East Pakistan) and democratic governments (Sri Lanka), imposed trade sanctions and border blockades, negotiated covert agreements (Nepal), made unilateral economic and political concessions (SAARC), and provided development aid. In spite of the numerous difficulties brought on by the economic structure, SAARC not only survived but also progressively expanded to build an institutional framework, and created an environment for regional collaboration.

India has, however, seldom ever succeeded in forging a lasting regional power status despite having greater material resources. Its discussions should be guided by readiness to make accommodations rather than its demand on reciprocity. The answer lies in India asserting and emphasising the distinct political identities of each of its neighbours while also conveying its firm assurances that it has no desire to reintegrate them into any fictitious or centralised "Indian subcontinent political system."

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