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India's Evolving Approach to Regionalism: SAARC and Beyond

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Abstract

One of the key issues debated today in assessing India's rise is its role in global and regional governance. This paper attempts to assess India's changing approach towards regionalism and argues that unlike the Nehruvian approach that overlooked South Asia in region building efforts, the new regional approach gives equal emphasis to South Asia regionalism and the wider Indo-Pacific regionalism. The paper asserts that India's new leadership role in region building stems from its own self-interest as well as the interests of the wider region. The paper also examines the main factors driving India's new regional approach and the strategic challenges in evolving an effective role in regional governance.

Keywords

Regionalism, India, Regional Governance, SAARC, BIMSTEC

Introduction

India is today a member of several trans-regional, regional and sub-regional groupings. As India rises, there is recognition that for its own interests it needs to consider the wider regional as well as global interests. On the one hand, India today sees global and regional multilateral mechanisms as platforms to engage with the outside world to meet the expectations from a rising power. On the other hand, India needs global and regional multilateral organisations to meet its own rising aspirations. A 'new narrative' in world politics of the twenty-first century is the 'power shift' from the West to the East. Though some scholars continue to challenge the notion that there is a major power shift underway (Cox 2012). At the core of this new narrative is the rise of China and India. Recent years have increasingly seen the inability of existing global institutions effectively managing

international crises. Within this context, a continuing debate is the role of rising powers in global governance and their impact on world politics (Mahbubani & Chesterman 2010; Kahler 2014).

Like other rising powers, India's 'willingness' and 'ability' to take on greater international responsibilities is debated (Acharya 2011). However, there are some instances where India has been playing an active contributing role in global governance in issue areas such as climate change and multilateral trade negotiations (Narlikar 2017; Saran 2012). The paradox of India's rise is that while there is a clear positive trend in its role in global governance, regional governance remains locked in geopolitics. South Asia is a region where despite the existence of a pan-South Asian organisation SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) for over three decades, it is yet to implement a single all SAARC project. The South Asia Satellite launched in May 2017 is case in point. The failure of SAARC framework meant that India's ability to contribute to regional governance has been severely limited, if not completely closed. As India's strategic interests widens in South Asia and beyond, it finds itself in direct geopolitical competition with a rising China whose interests and influence has been rapidly growing in these regions.

This paper assesses India's approach towards regionalism in South Asia and beyond. The paper first looks at regionalism in the South Asian context and attempts to locate India's approach towards regionalism. In so doing, it maps out India's changing perceptions of the utility of regional and sub-regional institutions. It identifies the key differences between the Nehruvian approach and Delhi's new regional approach. The paper also argues that unlike the past, New Delhi today views joining and building regional and sub-regional institutions as an important way of advancing its foreign policy interests. Further, it argues that while addressing increasing Chinese influence in the immediate and wider region is one factor driving India's changing perceptions of regional institutions, New Delhi also increasingly views its involvement in regional and sub-regional institutions as a vital instrument to further its interests independent of China's actions. Finally, the paper concludes with a few observations as well as challenges.

Regionalism - The Concept

The concept of 'region' differs from discipline to discipline. However, whether it is in comparative politics or international relations most scholars agree that regions are socially constructed. As Hettne (2005, p.544) put it: '...all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested.' Because regions are constructed, the most important aspect to understand region depends on 'how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of 'regionness' (Hettne 2005, p. 544). Furthermore, in this fast changing world increasingly driven and shaped

by technology, some observers anticipate that the idea of 'region' may undergo radical changes and in the near future the world may have 'virtual regions' where people with shared interest or belief from different parts of the world come together to form forums using technology (Jarrar 2016). Even so, in the narrower definition of region, the element of 'geographic proximity' is seen as essential (Behr & Jokeia 2011). South Asia as a region lacks clarity of a geographical 'vision' (Michael 2013, p. 15) i.e. where South Asia begins and where it ends. In recent years, the emphasis on the elements of regions have been shifting from geography to 'political and ideational character of regions' (Behr & Jokeia 2011, p. 4). South Asia has been atypical when seen from this perspective. It emerged from a region "characterised by political disharmony and strategic schism", unlike other regionalism projects where "...politico-strategic harmony [forms] a vital factor in stimulating and facilitating close and extensive cooperative linkages, including those in security and strategic areas" (Muni 1985 pp. 391-92; Tiwari 1985). The idea of a regional grouping in South Asia emerged from within a diverse set of interests among its member states. These political and strategic divergences continue to affect SAARC even today after three decades of its existence. Given this characteristic, South Asia has been a 'formal' region rather than a 'real' region. The existence of SAARC as the basis to define South Asia as a 'region' is but notional because of the lack of shared strategic interests among its member-states.

From the regional security perspective, the 'Regional Security Complex Theory' (RSCT) of the Copenhagen School (Buzan & Waever 2003) explains that the rivalry between India and Pakistan defines South Asia security complex. This 'pattern' of South Asian security dynamics has not changed, but with its rise, India's security interests has expanded beyond the confines South Asia. India's own interests to safeguard its interests in its neighbourhood and to reach out to nations in the Indo-Pacific region, on the one hand and China's growing strategic entry in South Asia, on the other has reinforced the strategic rivalry between India and China both in the subcontinent as well as in the wider Indo-Pacific region. Hence, there is a growing tendency of India finding itself in the 'Asian supercomplex'. It is within this strategic context that India's perceptions towards regional and subregional institutions have been evolving.

From the 'narrow focus on free trade arrangements and security alliances' that existed up until the 1970s, the concept of 'regionalism' has undergone drastic changes. By the mid-1980s, a worldwide phenomenon emerged which came to be known as the 'new regionalism' (Fawcett 1995). Analysing the new phenomenon, Hettne and Söderbaum (1998, p. 3) noted that in contrary to the 'old regionalism' that emerged in the context of the Cold War politics, major structural changes in the global system including multipolarity caused the emergence of the new regionalism. Identifying the basic characteristics of the new regionalism, Hettne

and Söderbaum (1998) argue that the new regionalism is ‘comprehensive’, ‘multifaceted’ and ‘multidimensional’ and unlike the old regionalism it involves ‘more spontaneous processes’ that often emerge ‘from below’ and from within the region itself.’ In the new regionalism, the level and process of regionalisation takes place at interregional, interstate as well as subnational (subregional) levels. Moreover, the new regionalism is ‘extroverted’ rather than ‘introverted’ and thus supports ‘open regionalism’ (Hettne & Söderbaum 1998).

India’s Evolving Regional Approach

The bipolar politics greatly shaped India’s approach towards regionalism in the post-independence period. India was not averse to the idea of regionalism *per se*, but the notion of ‘region’ for the Indian leadership then was much broader that encompasses the entire Asian continent. India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru actively initiated and participated in several political conferences involving nations from South and Southeast Asia in the 1940s and 1950s including the Asian Relations Conference that was held in New Delhi in 1947, the Colombo Conference in 1954 and the Bandung Asian-African Conference of 1955. The broad contours that guided India’s early regional initiatives revolved around a couple of ideas—to promote cooperation among Asian and African nations and to contribute to world peace (Michael 2013, p.52). However, lack of defining a geographical scope or ‘regional clarity’ and objection to any form of ‘collective security’ meant that these initial efforts could not materialised into regional institutions ((Michael 2013, p.50-53). Moreover, India’s approach towards an Asian regionalism was politically oriented and ideologically driven, with economic co-operation figuring marginally (Michael 2013, p. 49). In his idealistic vision of building Asian unity and solidarity, Nehru:

at times inadvertently displayed a tendency to take the smaller neighbours for granted. ...Nehru seldom thought in terms of assiduously building a community with the smaller immediate neighbours. If at all, he thought that such a community would be encompassed within the broader goal of Asian solidarity (Muni 2003, p. 187).

In Nehru’s vision of building region, the assumption was that the South Asian neighbours would join India in its efforts to construct an Asian regionalism. Even when Nehru called for a ‘South Asia Federation’, his notion of ‘South Asia’ involved Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq and Myanmar with only the last country sharing land boundary with India. Furthermore, Nehru’s active involvement in region building in Asia met with challenges with long terms implications. The negative attitude of smaller countries towards India’s efforts to regionalism meant that India was averse to take the leading role in building regionalism (Mohan 2016).

Even as India remained wary of the idea of regional cooperation in South Asia, by the late 1970s the need for a regional forum was felt and the thinking gained momentum. India showed initial hesitation for two reasons. First, India was concerned that a regional organisation may give the smaller neighbours to 'gang up' against it. This would have direct impact on its approach in dealing with its immediate neighbours negating its most preferred approach of bilateralism and open room for 'regionalising' bilateral issues. Second, India was also wary of majority decision-making being institutionalised. It felt this might affect its 'freedom in foreign affairs' (Dash 2008, p. 87). As voices grew among the smaller neighbours for the establishment of SAARC, India decided to join the regional grouping after ensuring that 'unanimity on decisions at all levels, exclusion of bilateral and contentious issues, and unanimous approval for external assistance or intervention' form the basic principles of the regional forum (Dash 2008, p. 87). The birth of SAARC marked a new chapter of regionalism in South Asia. It was the first regional organisation represented by seven countries of the region.

Sharing close historical, cultural, and geographical ties with all nations of South Asia, the region remains critical for India's internal stability and development as well as in reaching out to the outside world. New Delhi also has its own self-interest to make the SAARC project work. The reason for this is not so much India's belief in the future of SAARC but, more importantly, because a 'dead SAARC at India's behest will only make India's neighbourhood policy more difficult and its international image more unpalatable' (Muni 2003, p. 188). The roots of the new thinking could be found in the "Gujral Doctrine" that, in essence, sought to accommodate India's smaller neighbours with good faith and trust without seeking reciprocity. In the past, one of the reasons why India was not keen about SAARC resulted from its belief that 'India is unlikely to accrue substantial economic benefits from any SAARC arrangements' ((Dash 2008, p. 199). A key principle that guided India's new regional approach since the 1990s was the notion of 'collective prosperity'. Even as collective regional prosperity began to emerge in speeches of Indian leaders, political differences within SAARC remained an obstruction. An important dimension of 'new regionalism' is the 'bottom-up approach'. The idea of sub-regional approach opened up new ways to build regionalism in South Asia. Some have described this as 'sub-regionalism approach to regional integration in South Asia' and 'SAARC takes the road to sub-regionalism.' This approach allowed New Delhi to circumvent the SAARC mechanism while addressed the much-needed collaboration with those neighbours willing to push for regional integration in South Asia.

The first such 'collaborative sub-regionalism' was experimented with South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) in 1997 involving four SAARC nations (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) with the aim to enhance 'regional solidar-

ity and promoting overall development within SAARC' with an emphasis on project-based development.¹ In 2000, the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme in the SAGQ was launched with assistance from Asian Development Bank (ADB) with six priority sectors that included transport, energy and power, tourism, environment, trade, investment, and private sector cooperation, and information and communication technology (Palit & Islam 2010). During this period, India also supported and participated in promoting other sub-regional and regional forums outside the SAARC framework. In the same year SAGQ was launched, India became a founding member of The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) involving South and Southeast Asia nations (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand). BIMSTEC's key objective was to initiate cooperation among the littorals of the Bay of Bengal with particular focus on commerce, investment, technology, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, fisheries, transport and communication, textiles, leather.

By the turn of the century, India further pushed its eastward drive when it set up another sub-regional grouping with the mainland Southeast Asian nations. In 2000, India along with five of the Mekong nations (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) established the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC). The MGC emphasised cooperation in the field of tourism, culture, education, and transportation linkages. In the same year, India and South Africa together launched the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) along with Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Yemen, Tanzania, Madagascar and Mozambique. The IOR-ARC's main objectives were to promote sustainable growth and balanced development; economic cooperation for shared and mutual benefits and remove impediments and lower barriers towards a freer and enhanced flow of goods, services, investment, and technology among the member-states. These initiatives suggest that India recognised the benefits of cooperation in maintaining good relations with its neighbours. As Muni (2003, p. 186) observed:

The Indian policy makers came to accept with various degrees of candour that India has a greater responsibility to work for the evolution of constructive and cooperative neighbourhood relationships, not only because it is big, but also because it is more resourceful. Furthermore, India would, perhaps, reap greater advantages in its overall foreign policy initiatives, if it enjoy a greater support and understanding of its neighbours and its efforts and attention is not unduly trapped within the South Asian region.

However, the reorientation of India's regional approach that began in the early

¹ See The 9th SAARC Summit Declaration issued on 14 May 1997

1990s, particularly with the launch of the 'Look East' policy followed by the 'Gujral Doctrine', took strategic dimensions only in the mid-2000s. By the turn of 20th century, the stakes for New Delhi to recalibrate its regional policy became even more urgent owing to developments both within India as well as in the neighbourhood, both having direct implications on India's regional diplomacy. Two strategic factors, in particular, have significantly shaped India's new regional approach (Yhome 2015). Domestically, the process of economic reforms that began in the 1990s led the country witness phenomenal economic growth. To sustain the new economic growth trajectory, one of the key concerns has been to ensure regional instability so that it does not hamper its growth (Saran 2006; Menon 2007; Mohan 2011). Another strategic factor relates to the China factor. As China's increases its presence and influence in South Asia and beyond, the concern of losing influence in the region to China also grew larger in New Delhi's regional calculations (Mohan 2007).

If the Gujral Doctrine emphasised the need for India to be more generous to its smaller neighbours as the bigger neighbour, the 'Manmohan Singh Doctrine' stressed the idea of sharing India's rise with its neighbours with the hope that the region's economy is tied to India's and that instability in the neighbourhood does not adversely affect India's growth. Taking the new regional approach forward in building an integrated neighbourhood, in 2007 India announced that as the largest country in SAARC it would open its market to the Least Developed Countries without insisting on reciprocity and further reduced the sensitive list in respect of these countries. India also strengthened its engagements with sub-regional groupings. For instance, membership in the sub-regional forum BIM-STEAC was not only expanded to include Nepal and Bhutan in 2004 but also the forum decided to set up a permanent secretariat, and Dhaka was finalised as the location at the third BIMSTEAC Summit in 2011. India also began to push for physical connectivity with its neighbours both to integrate the region with its economy as well as to tie these economies to its own. An important policy calibration has been to open up its frontiers to its neighbours for border trade. The need to push for SAARC regional connectivity, urgently, was also seen in the context of China's growing involvement in trans-national connectivity in the region.

As part of the new thinking on regionalism of the 1990s, the realisation of deep interdependence in the security realm among South Asian nations where India cannot insulate itself also pushed New Delhi to reframe its regional security approach. This thinking allowed India to see itself as a regional leader as well as collaborate with neighbours in ensuring regional order and stability. A bilateral exercise launched in 1992 between India and the US, the Malabar, began as a familiarisation exercise between the navies of the two countries acquired greater geopolitical content by the mid-2000s involving interoperability exercises and

with participation from more countries, though it revert back to the bilateral exercise following protest from China.² The Indian Navy also began hosting the Milan exercise in 1995 with South and Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Singapore) with the aim to foster closer cooperation among navies of countries in the Indian Ocean region. An important initiative of the Indian Navy, part of India's defence diplomacy with the Indian Ocean littorals, was the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Launched in 2008, the IONS aims 'to increase maritime cooperation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region.... [to help] preserve peaceful relations between nations, and thus is critical to building an effective maritime security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region and is also fundamental to [the region's] collective prosperity.'³ With navies from 36 Indian Ocean littoral countries from South Asia, West Asia, East Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia, the IONS 'seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues.'⁴

With growing concerns over China's rapidly expanding footprints in the Indian Ocean region and increasing non-traditional security threats, India also launched maritime cooperation with neighbouring Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2011. A tripartite maritime security cooperation was signed in July 2013 with the aim to buttress maritime cooperation to secure sea routes in the Indian Ocean. Recognising the need for wider participation on the emerging issues of the Indian Ocean, New Delhi took the lead in creating new platforms for exchange of views among the IOR littorals. Giving a renewed push to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), at its 13th meeting of the Council of Ministers in Perth, Australia in November 2013, Indian External Affairs Minister announced New Delhi's plans to host the Track 1.5 Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) to bring together scholars, experts and policy-makers from the Indian Ocean regional grouping to exchanges views. Similarly, India hosted the first Trilateral Dialogue on Indian Ocean (TDIO) in November 2013 involving Australia, Indonesia and India. In the Indo-Pacific region, India's role in shaping the emerging economic architecture of the region further opened up when its became a member of the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS) that emerged as a forum 'for strategic dialogue and cooperation on political, security and economic issues of common regional concern and plays an important role in the regional architecture.'⁵ India endorsed all the six priority areas of regional cooperation within the framework of the EAS that include environment and energy, education, finance, global health

² The MALABAR 2007 included participation of naval vessels from Japan, Australia and Singapore apart from India and the US.

³ See official website of the Royal Australian Navy at <http://www.navy.gov.au/ions>

⁴ See official website of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) at http://ions.gov.in/about_ions

⁵ See "About East Asia Summit", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India at <http://www.mea.gov.in/aseanindia/about-eas.htm>

issues and pandemic diseases, natural disaster management, and ASEAN Connectivity. Importantly, in 2012, ASEAN and the six FTA Partners of ASEAN, which includes India, launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and India has been actively participating in the RCEP negotiations.

Coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a renewed push to the efforts towards an integrated neighbourhood by launching the 'Neighbourhood First' approach towards South Asia and demonstrated greater political will to shape the emerging security and economic dynamics in the wider Indo-Pacific region through the 'Act East' policy (Bhatnagar & Passi 2016). In the South Asia context, new hopes were raised of the revival of SAARC when Prime Minister Modi invited SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony and after his speech at the 18th SAARC held in Kathmandu (Sidhu & Mehta 2014). A couple of recent developments suggest that India is willing to push for regional integration in South Asia. When Pakistan expressed its reservations on the SAARC-Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) during the Kathmandu Summit in 2014, India along with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal initiated a sub-regional initiative to enhance connectivity and signed the BBIN-MVA in 2015. In another initiative, India has shown generosity to its neighbours with its 'gift' of the South Asia satellite that can be used by neighbours for communication purposes. Here again, Pakistan is the only country that has opted itself out of the project. Speaking about the satellite, Prime Minister Modi said that his government's motto is not limited to only India but extended in the 'global context' and that the 'capacities of the satellite and the facilities it provides will go a long way in addressing South Asia's economic and development priorities' (ENS 1 May 2017). After the launch of the satellite on 5 May 2017, Prime Minister Modi said 'the advanced space technology [was] for the cause of growth and prosperity of our brothers and sisters in South Asia.... With this launch, we have started a journey to build the most advanced frontier of our partnership' (ENS 7 May 2017).

At the sub-regional level, the Modi government further strengthened groupings such as the BIMSTEC, the SESEC/BBIN and the MGC as part of the Act East policy with the aim to accelerate the integration process in the region. For instance, India pledged to contribute 32 per cent of the annual expenditure on BIMSTEC's permanent secretariat in Dhaka. Similarly, during the eighth MGC Senior officials' Meeting held in New Delhi on 7 April 2017, India offered 15 more scholarships to the Mekong countries together with existing scholarships. Another development that underlines India's eastward drive at the sub-regional level is the expansion of the SASEC programme of the ADB to include Myanmar as its seventh member. The inclusion of Myanmar is seen as 'key to realizing greater connectivity and stronger trade and economic relations between the SASEC sub-region and the countries of East and Southeast Asia' (PIB 1 April

2017a).

In the Indian Ocean region, the Modi government has taken major policy initiatives to promote collective action and integrated maritime security coordination. Prime Minister Modi's vision of the Indian Ocean region was outlined in 2015 in the acronym *SAGAR* (Security and Growth for All in the Region). At the commissioning of Indian-made patrol vessel Barracuda that India exported to Mauritius, Prime Minister Modi said: 'Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation' (PIB 2017b). Prime Minister Modi sketch out India's ambitions of strengthening regional mechanisms for maritime cooperation and sought the involvement of 'Mauritius, Seychelles and other nations in the region' to join the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives trilateral initiative. As part of this initiative, the Indian government have set up the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) with the sole purpose 'to track ships in real time and to assess threats at sea'. India has been in talks with several countries in the Indian Ocean region to enter in data-sharing agreement on white shipping. This ambition took concrete shape with signing of agreements with island-nations (Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles) in the Indian Ocean and with the installation of Coastal Surveillance Radar System that are to provide IMAC with real-time data (Saint-Mézard 2016). India has also been strengthening closer security ties with the key players in the Indo-Pacific region. This could be seen in the expansion of the Malabar exercise as it acquired a trilateral status with the inclusion of Japan and the setting up of the Japan-India-Australia trilateral in 2015 (Lang 2015).

Differences Between the Nehruvian Approach and Delhi's New Regional Approach

The above discussion lays out the evolution of India's approach to regional multi-lateral organisation. As noted earlier, 'regions' are constructed and re-constructed. Interestingly, the ideas of the current Indian leadership in the construction of an 'Indo-Pacific region' is similar to Nehru's vision of constructing an Asian community in the post-independence period. This commonality however signify a continuing 'uncertainty about geographical scope' (Michael 2013, p. 50). Beyond this lack of 'regional geographical clarity', there are significant differences between the Nehruvian approach and the current regional approach of India. First, in the early years of its independence, India envisioned a much broader regionalism overlooking South Asia. In the current thinking, equal emphasis is given to both the two constructs (South Asia and Indo-Pacific). India's present two-pronged strategy in pushing regionalism are: On the one hand, India is building South Asia regionalism through a "bottom-up" approach with innovative ideas such as

sub-regionalism. Given its centrality in South Asia, there is a considered opinion that regionalism cannot grow without India's active support. Unlike the first wave of regionalism, the current Indian regionalism efforts is not only aware of South Asia's critical position in achieving its global ambitions but also constructing a wider regionalism encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is inevitable as India's strategic interests expands beyond its backyard.

Second, as noted earlier, the Nerhuvian approach of building regionalism was largely political and ideological in nature driven by the 'common anti-colonial sentiment' among the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa. Contrary to this, the new Indian regional approach is driven by strategic interests. Several ideas, concepts and principles have been driving and guiding India's new regional approach. The first idea is 'intertwined destiny.' The idea that India is willing to give its immediate neighbours a stake in its own prosperity has become a priority in its neighbourhood policy for some time. This notion is driven by the logic that India's immediate neighbourhood is a prerequisite for it to achieve regional and global ambitions. A crisis-ridden neighbourhood would keep India preoccupied. Furthermore, the urgency for India to reset its neighbourhood policy has been shaped by China's growing economic presence and influence in India's sub-continental neighbourhood. Failing to integrate the sub-continent with its economy would increase the potential of South Asian nations to look towards China to fulfil their developmental needs with long-term strategic implications for India (Gulati 2015).

Third, in the first wave of Indian regionalism, New Delhi was against any 'collective defence' pact. In the current approach, new concept has been employed that allows India to enter into regional security arrangements. The concept of 'cooperative security' emphasises peaceful means to dealing with conflicts through negotiations and confidence-building measures (Mohan 2006, p. 352). Importantly, cooperative security is 'premised on the assumption that states will act in their own self-interest' (Mohan 2006, p. 353). India recognises that an unstable South Asia could guarantee neither its economic development nor its security. In this sense, as in the economic realm, the need to engage the region in security is based on its own self-interest. Encouraged by signs of cooperative security between India and Pakistan soon after their respective nuclear tests in the late 1990s when both agreed to avoid nuclear war, there was hope of a beginning for 'a cooperative security regime' in South Asia was taking shape (Mohan 2006, p. 352). However, such hope were dash in the context of continued hostilities and tensions between India and Pakistan. By the turn of the century, New Delhi was determined to explore new ways to make the concept relevant where opportunities exist, even if that means minus Pakistan. As discussed above, India has precisely taken forward the idea of building maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

BIMSTEC: India's Road to Regionalism

With the regional grouping SAARC making little headway, the idea of sub-regionalism to push for regional integration has become the prime driver of India's regional integration building in South Asia and beyond. This could be seen both in the economic field as well as in the security domain. The BIMSTEC is a classic example of the incremental approach to regionalism. The unique position of the seven-member BIMSTEC presents itself fittingly in New Delhi's diplomatic calculus. The strategic salience of the BIMSTEC for India can be ascertained when seen through India's sub-regions (Yhome 2017). The BIMSTEC connects three important sub-regions of India — Nepal and Bhutan in the Himalayan sub-region; Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal sub-region; and Myanmar and Thailand in the Mekong sub-region. BIMSTEC is the only forum that brings together India's strategic peripheries (South, East and North) under one single grouping. Furthermore, it also keeps geopolitical concerns at bay as regional players such as China and Pakistan are not members of BIMSTEC. The BIMSTEC is also at the centre of New Delhi's engagements with other various regional and sub-regional groupings in India's eastern neighbourhood with its members often are also members of other regional and sub-regional groupings in their respective regions and sub-regions. For instance, Myanmar and Thailand are members of ASEAN and Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) while Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are members of SAARC and BBIN. Bangladesh and Myanmar are also members of the four-member sub-regional BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) forum along with India and China. The progress of BIMSTEC, therefore, could help regional integration of the entire north-eastern Indian Ocean region with the Bay of Bengal at the centre.

A recent event that demonstrates the centrality of BIMSTEC in India's regional approach is the Modi government's initiative to invite BIMSTEC leaders to the BRICS outreach summit held in India in October 2016 (Yhome 2016). Various factors explain New Delhi's decision. First, amid New Delhi's efforts to isolate Islamabad, inviting SAARC leaders would have defeated the purpose. Much has changed in India's regional diplomacy since Prime Minister Modi invited SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014. Second, while Delhi has the option of inviting leaders of the sub-regional BBIN initiative, this would have left out other neighbours including Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Delhi could have also looked further east and invited leaders from the Mekong countries under the auspices of MGC or even the nations of ASEAN under India-ASEAN partnership. However, then questions could be raised as to why New Delhi overlooked its immediate neighbours. Moreover, India-ASEAN partnership and the MGC are forums involving only India and Southeast Asian nations without membership from other South Asian nations. Inviting BIMSTEC leaders to the BRICS Summit also subtly demonstrates that the sub-regions represented in the BIMSTEC

form India's traditional backward where its primacy should to be respected.

India's strategic interests in these sub-regions have been growing over the recent years both as a result of India's own domestic interests as well as because of enhanced Chinese influence and presence in these geo-strategic sub-regions. The China factor has emerged as a major area of geopolitical concern in India's engagements with the nations in these sub-regions. Islamabad's unwillingness to be part of regional cooperation where India is involved was clearly demonstrated with its opposition to the SAARC-MVA and the South Asia satellite. The prospect for bilateral and regional cooperation along India's western border remains limited with no signs of improving ties with its arch-rival Pakistan, even though India made significant efforts from 2003–2007 and then in 2011–2013 to enhance connectivity and give a fillip to bilateral trade. Delhi's strategic spaces to manoeuvre and its ability to take its regional diplomacy to a new level, particularly the 'Act East' policy will largely depend on its engagements with its eastern neighbourhood. BIMSTEC along with other regional and sub-regional forums where India is a member are platforms to achieve these objectives.

Implications and Challenges

If China is the factor pushing India to play a more active role in the region, the question is, would India undertake regional initiatives in the absence of the China factor. One may argue that the urgency to recalibrated its regional approach would have been missing without China in its regional calculus. But at the same time, there is no denying the fact that India has been increasingly taking regional initiatives for its own self-interest and the wider regional interests, particularly in areas such as the maritime domain. Even as India's sheds off its traditional inhibitions to shape regional governance, several issues continue to pose challenges to India's role as a regional leader. Traditional issues in South Asia such as territorial disputes (particularly the Kashmir dispute), regional rivalry with Pakistan (which is likely to increase as a result of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project), and lack of trust with its smaller neighbours. In the wider Indo-Pacific region, China's growing military and economic power is and will remain a major challenge as the two compete for leadership in the Indo-Pacific region.

India is increasingly taking the lead to improve regional governance in key areas including socio-economic development, maritime, energy, water, cyber, space and security. In any community building project the people of the region are the most significant component. India's various capacity-building efforts in South Asia, the Mekong region, and in the island nations of the Indian Ocean contributes to good regional governance. Sustainable development and management has been at the core of India's cooperation at the regional and sub-regional groupings and this will have implications on regional recourses such as water and energy. The

necessity to adopt such an approach in regional cooperation will only grow with issues such as climate change, rise in sea-level, energy scarcity, food security, natural disasters, etc. likely to force countries to work together to shape the emerging 'development regionalism' narrative in the region.

Perhaps, India's role in regional maritime security governance is the most visible and significant in recent years. Not only is India providing new ideas and initiatives in shaping the discourse on regional maritime security, but also its peaceful settlement of maritime boundary dispute with Bangladesh has demonstrated the country's respect for international norms in sea governance. The initiatives to strengthen a new maritime order in the Indian Ocean region by creating mechanisms both with its immediate neighbours such as the Sri Lanka and Maldives but also with other regional and extra-regional players will have long-term implications for the evolving dynamics of the emerging security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. India's initiatives have been laying the ground for the emergence of 'security regionalism' in the maritime domain. India is beginning to demonstrate that it has the intent and the capability to maintain a stable regional order at sea. In fact, several analysts argue that India is beginning to take up leadership role particularly in regional maritime governance. Examining India's role in the emerging maritime governance in the Indian Ocean, an analyst commented that the IONS is 'an important initiative aimed at enhancing naval interoperability, the sharing of information and capacity building' (Schöttli, 2014, p.4). The observer further commented that the IONS has been 'a consultative mechanism [in tackling] the issue of asymmetric threats and common transnational maritime concerns'. A recent analysis on India's 'Act East' policy observes that '...an interesting dimension of the 'Act East' policy may lie in [the] fact that it has openly acknowledged India's security responsibilities... [and that India's recent maritime] initiatives reflect a nascent positioning as a net security provider, or at least an attempt to progress along that line' (Saint-Mézard 2016, p. 188). India's regional cooperation efforts in tackling non-traditional security threats such as cyber-crime, natural disasters, food security, climate change, counter-terrorism, etc. suggest that India is increasing its role in regional security dynamics in South Asia and beyond.

Conclusion

Drawing from the above discussion, this paper concludes with a few observations. First, India has begun to take leadership role in shaping and building regionalism in South Asia and beyond. India's regionalism and sub-regionalism efforts have paid dividends primarily because of improvements in bilateral relations with some neighbouring countries. This is evident from the fact that in its eastern borders where India has improved its bilateral relations with countries such as Bangladesh and Dhaka's own changing perceptions of Islamabad, has enabled sub-re-

gionalism projects to make progress, while in its western border, the protracted conflictual relationship with Pakistan has failed to open up such opportunity. Second, like most rising powers, India's self-interest is the key driver in its regional cooperative initiatives. Third, New Delhi is finding innovative ways of creating alternative mechanisms to address the much-needed regional governance. Fourth, India is today actively contributing to shaping the regional order and there is a continuity in the country's foreign policy since the early 1990s. A broad consensus has emerged on India's approach towards regionalism in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. In building 'security regionalism', India has employed various policy instruments at its disposals. Naval diplomacy has been the most active both in South Asia and in the Indo-Pacific region. In building 'development regionalism', New Delhi has employed both economic diplomacy and 'techno diplomacy' to reach out to the region. India's idea of building regionalism is governed by an incremental approach and this fits in well with sub-regional initiatives to achieve regional integration. In the political domain, India's regional stability efforts is still a work in progress.

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