

Cooperation in South Asia

The Case for Redefining Alliances

APRIL 2016 **MANJARI CHATTERJEE MILLER AND
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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formally established in 1985 when its charter was approved by the governments of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.¹ These states face common challenges, including alleviating poverty, and there is great potential for boosting intraregional trade. However, SAARC has not turned out to be a model of regional cooperation as originally envisioned.

Indeed, there is such a lack of close cooperation among the members of SAARC that writers looking to highlight its achievements can point only to its existence as a mark of success.² Others are more critical. Yashwant Sinha, a former Indian Minister of External Affairs, has dubbed SAARC “a complete failure.”³ In 2014, intraregional trade in South Asia was only 5 percent of South Asia’s total foreign trade.⁴ More than a decade after a preferential trade agreement was signed, the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) finally came into effect in 2006 to create a duty-free area for all member countries by 2016. But SAFTA remains a very limited agreement—less than 10 percent of the intraregional trade that takes place occurs under SAFTA.⁵ The most recent SAARC summit held in 2014 in Kathmandu, Nepal, broke down over the members’ inability to reconcile differences and sign three pacts aimed at boosting rail and road connectivity and setting up a regional power grid.⁶

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- 1 In 2008, SAARC expanded to include Afghanistan.
- 2 “Some Thoughts about the South Asian Region,” East Asia Forum, June 12, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/06/12/some-thoughts-about-the-south-asian-region/>.
- 3 Yashwant Sinha, “The SAARC Experiment Has Failed,” *Economic Times*, June 27, 2010, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/special-report/the-saarc-experiment-has-failed/articleshow/6096578.cms>.
- 4 Comparatively, ASEAN’s trade is 25.8 percent of Southeast Asia’s total foreign trade. See “SAARC: The Way Ahead,” Issue Brief #102, Observer Research Foundation, August 2015.
- 5 “SAARC Summit Nears Failure as Pakistan, India Differ,” LiveMint.com, November 27 2014, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/ryP8JVeOs40QPK3ghWfHRJ/Narendra-Mo-di-seeks-to-bolster-regional-power-at-Saarc-summi.html>.
- 6 Ibid.

While SAARC's economic policies are shortsighted, there is agreement that more than economics is responsible for the failure of SAARC. Academic and policy analyses cite the conflictual India-Pakistan relationship as the primary political barrier to SAARC's success.⁷ Confidential interviews with officials from SAARC countries confirm this perception, and they engage in a thinly veiled blame game. They cite the lack of dynamic leadership in South Asia in general and the absence of strong political leaders in India in particular, as well as a failure on India's part to assume responsibility and take a leadership role in SAARC.⁸

However, all of these accounts tend to underestimate three important factors. First, the key difference between a successful institution like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and an unsuccessful institution like the SAARC is the presence of a hegemon, India.⁹ Second, this severe power imbalance underlines the political contingency of some of the region's most important bilateral relationships such as India-Bangladesh and India-Sri Lanka. These relationships are often contentious, unstable, and highly prone to mistrust. Third, these bilateral relationships are complicated not just by federal/central politics but also by state politics.

Political mistrust in SAARC is high and this, in turn, leads to shortsighted economic policies. For example, members maintain large "sensitive" lists of goods, that is, items that are not offered concessional tariffs ostensibly to provide protection to certain sectors,¹⁰ resulting in 53

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percent of the total intraregional import trade being excluded from the tariff liberalization program under SAFTA.¹¹ This is not to suggest that the India-Pakistan conflict is not a disruptive factor—at the 2014 summit, the pacts were blocked by Pakistan—but rather that it should be considered in tandem with these other bilateral relationships.

India-Pakistan

Before examining the India-Bangladesh and India-Sri Lanka relationships, it is important to understand that the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship continues to be conflictual, despite recent outreach by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and that this impacts SAARC.

Prime Minister Modi came to power in May 2014 with a decisive mandate. Accompanying that victory were the expectations of Indians who put aside Modi's Hindu-centric politics, hoping for a strong leader who would address the challenges that India currently faces, including a key one—the India-Pakistan relationship.

Modi began his term with an invitation to the leaders of all SAARC countries, including Pakistan, for his swearing-in ceremony. Since then, the Modi administration has continued its outreach to Pakistan. The Modi government has pursued a policy of a "twin track engagement":¹² it has maintained

pressure on the military along the border, and has simultaneously engaged with the civilian leadership to keep the channels of communication open. Modi's surprise stopover in Lahore, Pakistan, in December 2015 reflected his acknowledgement that instead of aiming for a grand reconciliation between the two countries, he believes it is better to aim for the successful

7 "SAARC: The Way Ahead," op. cit.; Faizal Yahya, "Pakistan, SAARC, and ASEAN Relations," *Contemporary South East Asia*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2004, pp. 346-75; "For SAARC to Work, India and Pakistan Must Resolve Differences," *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2014.

8 Author's interviews with government officials in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, September-December 2015.

9 Interestingly, two high-ranking Indian government officials refused to use the word "hegemon" with reference to India even though the officials were in clear agreement with the author about the power imbalance.

10 Examples of sensitive items include certain agricultural products and goods from small-scale producers.

11 Nisha Taneja, Saon Ray, Neetika Kaushal, and Devjit Roy Chowdhury, *Enhancing Intra-SAARC Trade: Pruning India's Sensitive List under SAFTA*, Working Paper 255 (Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, April 2011).

12 "High Visibility: India Is Reaching Out to the World," *Economist*, May 23, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21651332-india-reaching-out-world-high-visibility>.



management of adversarial relations through constant engagement and confidence-building measures.

However, despite the outreach by the Modi administration, India-Pakistan trade and business continue to be the victims of the political rivalry between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Over the years, the biggest benefactors of the lack of trade normalization have been transit trade points outside of South Asia, such as Dubai, through which trade between India and Pakistan is conducted. Infrastructure constraints, lack of transit access facilities, and limitations on the items that can be traded have all been important factors that have contributed to this state of play. Average flying time between Islamabad and Delhi, for example, is approximately eight hours because of the lack of direct flights.

The dearth of financial mechanisms between India and Pakistan have also hampered bilateral trade. The two South Asian neighbors have yet to implement a 2005

agreement that was signed by their central banks to open branches in their respective countries.

Issues such as granting most-favored nation status to India by Pakistan, or granting deeper market access to Pakistan by India, have always been politically charged. While India has duty-free arrangements with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal, it has yet to treat Pakistan on the same terms—an imbalance that affects the goals of SAFTA.

Yet the India-Pakistan relationship is not the only political factor that should be taken into account when assessing SAARC. We turn, therefore, to two other important bilateral relationships: India-Bangladesh and India-Sri Lanka.

India-Bangladesh

After the bloody civil war in 1971 that dismembered Pakistan and led, with India's help, to the emergence of Bangladesh, one would have expected the India-

Bangladesh bilateral relationship to become a solid partnership. Even before the civil war, India had an open door policy for the Bengali refugees from East Pakistan fleeing the repressive Pakistani army. By 1971, India was fully supporting the Bengali officers and the guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini fighting to secede from Pakistan with money, shared intelligence, training camps, and weaponry.¹³ For India, the very creation of Bangladesh not only led to the military and economic weakening of Pakistan but also affirmed the weakness of religious nationalism in a region with pluralistic identities. It implicitly bolstered the Indian identity forged on secular nationalism.

Yet, since 1974, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's late pro-India Prime Minister and leader of the Awami League, was assassinated, India-Bangladesh relations have been subject to fluctuation and distrust. Officials in each country locate the sources of distrust differently. Indian officials talk of open Bangladeshi envy of India and its consequent inferiority complex. Bangladeshi officials talk of an undercurrent dominated by continuous anxiety about Indian power and periodic cynicism about India's motives in 1971.¹⁴ Setting aside the emotional roots of the distrust, two facts stand out in these conversations—at the central level, India-Bangladesh relations are deeply politically contingent; and at the state level the grievances of state governments and politics can derail progress in the relationship.

Even taking into account the Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, including the party's concern about illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh, the bilateral relationship is unquestionably more contingent on the political transitions within Bangladesh than on those within India. Changes in Bangladeshi political regimes have historically led to drastic changes in its foreign policy toward India. The first turning point came after Sheikh Mujib's assassination. Over the next decade, Bangladesh was wracked by a series of coups led by military regimes

that “emphasized the country's Islamic heritage and distanced themselves from the Indian government.”¹⁵

The end of military dictatorships in Bangladesh and the burgeoning of democratic politics in the 1990s did not lead to closer ties with India. Although the Awami League remained pro-India, it was contesting elections with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The BNP was formed in 1978 by the military dictator General Ziaur Rahman and later led by his widow Khaleda Zia, who became Prime Minister in 1991. The BNP followed the policies of the previous military governments in pursuing relationships with Pakistan and China, drew support from partners with strongly Islamic platforms such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, and displayed strong hostility toward the Indian government. While the BNP was in power until 1996, the bilateral relationship was at a standstill.

With the election of Awami League's Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister in 1996, some progress was made, such as signing the Ganges Water Sharing Agreement, but her party did not command enough support in parliament to push through major changes. The relationship froze again between 2001 and 2008, when the BNP returned to power and India alleged that Pakistan-supported militants were transiting through Bangladesh.¹⁶ This regime change in Bangladesh underlined the highly unstable state of the

India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship—there is little guarantee that advances made during the tenure of one regime will not be rolled back by another.

Since 2008, with Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League back in power with a solid majority, the India-Bangladesh relationship has been progressing. In 2009, Sheikh Hasina persuaded the security forces to hand over to India senior leaders of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an armed separatist group from India's troubled northeast, some of whose members had been sheltered in “safe custody” in Bangladesh.¹⁷ This was an extraordinary gesture. Since India and Bangladesh lack an extradition treaty, the Bangladeshi government

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13 Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Pan 2007), pp. 452-453.

14 Author's interviews with Indian and Bangladeshi officials, October-November 2015.

15 Cody M. Poplin, “India and Bangladesh: Review of Bilateral Opportunities,” Indian Development Cooperation Research, Center for Policy Research, February 20, 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 Author's interview with a Bangladeshi government official, November 2015.

improvised an alternative to a formal handing over: the separatists were taken to the border and released, with the Indians informed in advance of the day, time, and place of the release.¹⁸ There is greater cooperation at present between the security forces of both countries—intelligence cooperation, for example, is at a high while exchanges between senior command levels have increased substantially. In 2015, the founder of ULFA, Anup Chetia, was transferred to Indian custody.¹⁹ The disputed border enclaves between the two countries were finally settled with a land swap in August 2015. There is also now a strong focus on improving the trade relationship through greater connectivity—by building railroads and bus transit systems to facilitate the movement of people and goods.

At the same time, there are fears that the bilateral relationship could be derailed because of disputes at the state level. For example, one of the most serious and unsettled issues is water sharing. India and Bangladesh share fifty-four rivers. How water is shared along many of these rivers, especially the Ganges, is emotionally charged and disputed on both sides. However, Bangladesh, being the lower riparian state, would sign a treaty if India were to offer a serious resolution to water-sharing issues along rivers such as the Teesta.²⁰ But efforts by two successive Indian Prime Ministers—Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi—to offer a Teesta agreement have been impeded by the Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, who claims that it is disadvantageous for her state. Similarly, the 2015 land swap was strongly opposed by Banerjee who had to be coaxed and cajoled into agreeing to allow the Land Boundary Agreement to go forward.²¹

India-Sri Lanka

Akin to the India-Bangladesh relationship, unease with India's hegemony in Sri Lanka underlines political contingency and state-level issues, and these factors deeply affect the India-Sri Lanka bilateral relationship. However, there is a difference. In the former, the relationship is highly politically contingent and this *in turn* affects and is affected by state-level issues. In the latter, there is a reversal of this pattern: state-

level issues are crucial and these in turn can affect the political contingency.

The dominant issue that is rooted at the state level and has consistently dogged the India-Sri Lanka bilateral relationship is that of the ethnic Tamils and the politics of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka is a small country with a suppressed and highly discontented Tamil minority population, and it lies in the immediate neighborhood of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu that has a large Tamil population, many of whose members feel a strong affinity with the Sri Lankan Tamils. The political, linguistic, and cultural suppression of Sri Lankan Tamils by the Sinhalese majority led to decades of prolonged ethnic struggle and civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ultimately ended with the liquidation of the LTTE in 2009.

There are different analyses as to why and how the LTTE, one of the most well-organized, authoritarian, and powerful terrorist organizations in the world, was defeated and to what extent the Indian government assisted in its demise. It is undisputed, however, that over the course of this ethnic struggle—almost from inception to closure—India had been repeatedly involved. India's involvement over the decades, from the late 1970s to 2009, varied from training, arming, and sheltering the LTTE and other Tamil rebel groups to sending the ill-fated Indian Peacekeeping Force that fought a losing battle with the LTTE²² to overt and covert logistical and material support of the Sri Lankan government in its war against the LTTE.²³

For the Indian government, the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic conflict began as a state-level issue that had different elements. Among Indian Tamils in Tamil Nadu, there was overwhelming sympathy for the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils and their suffering at the hands of the Sri Lankan army. The two major political parties in Tamil Nadu, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, politicized the issue and pressured the Indian central government to deal firmly with Sri Lanka. At the same time, the thousands of Tamil refugees pouring into Tamil Nadu

18 Ibid.

19 "Bangladesh Extradites Top ULFA Militant," Reuters, November 11, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-extradites-top-ulfa-militant/a-18842447>.

20 Poplin, "India and Bangladesh: Review of Bilateral Opportunities," op. cit.

21 Author's conversation with an Indian politician, September 2015.

22 This battle resulted in the assassination of then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber.

23 Neil Devotta, "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka," *Asian Survey*, vol. 49, no. 6, November-December 2009; P. Venkateshwar Rao, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India's Role and Perception," *Asia Survey*, vol. 28, no. 4, April 1988, pp. 419-436; and author's interviews, 2015.

during the years of Sri Lanka's bloody war with the LTTE created the necessity for an Indian response. Finally, there existed the specter of the spread of Tamil linguistic nationalism that could inflame tensions within India. Eventually, as the Indian government withdrew support from the LTTE, this state issue morphed into national-level concerns about external involvement in the region and Indian security.

While the Indian government sees the issue as rooted in the "Tamil problem,"²⁴ Sri Lankan officials hold a different view. A current high-ranking Sri Lankan official unhesitatingly summed up the problem that dogs the relationship: "[the state of] Tamil Nadu."²⁵ According to this and other Sri Lankan officials the state of Tamil Nadu plays an outsize role in shaping not only how the conflict was framed and handled by India historically but also the tensions that persist even today after the demise of the LTTE. They complain that Tamil Nadu politicians politically exploit the Tamil ethnic issue, have a pattern of making "totally irrational" statements, and pressure the Indian government to "bully Sri Lanka."²⁶

The ongoing controversy about Tamil fishermen illustrates how disputes at the state level negatively impact the bilateral relationship as a whole. Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu fish in trawlers in waters beyond the Indian maritime zone. The Indian fishermen's use of synthetic nets and high-capacity trawlers enables their intensive fishing and threatens the livelihoods of Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen.²⁷ In retaliation, Sri Lanka has been arresting some of these Indian fishermen, leading to an outcry in India, and particularly in Tamil Nadu. For the central Indian government, this is a

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diplomatic and political headache. Indian government officials privately concede that the Indian fishermen, through overfishing and destructive methods such as the use of deep trawling nets, have stripped the Indian waters of fish and coral. These officials understand that some Indian fishermen illegally stray into Sri Lankan waters and are in the wrong. However, these same officials also have to deal with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram who has repeatedly accused the Indian government of not showing enough concern for these jailed Indian fishermen.²⁸ But, no Indian government "is willing to tell Jayalalitha to shut up" for fear of squandering its political capital.²⁹ For Sri Lanka, however, the fishermen issue is a huge problem and emblematic of how the Tamil Nadu government gets the Indian central government to bully Sri Lanka.³⁰

These state issues, in turn, affect political contingency in the relationship. Sri Lankan governments that have exacerbated the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils have had a strained relationship with India. For example, former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's repressive policies toward the Jaffna Tamil civilians and his refusal to devolve land and police powers to provincial councils strongly affected the bilateral relationship even though the Indian government supported his crackdown on the LTTE.

Recommendations

India's relationships with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are all problematic. However, while the India-Pakistan bilateral relationship will continue to be conflictual, especially in the short term, the India-Sri Lanka and India-Bangladesh relationships look more promising and offer an opportunity for SAARC's success. Currently, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have

24 Author's interview with Indian government officials, November-December 2015.

25 Author's interview with Sri Lankan official, December 2015.

26 Ibid.; Author's interview with Sri Lankan retired and current officials, December 2015.

27 Gautam Sen, "India-Sri Lanka Fishermen Problem: Some Solutions," IDSA Comment, Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, June 18, 2014.

28 "Sonia Gandhi 'Shedding Crocodile Tears' for Tamil Fishermen: Jayalalitha," NDTV, April 20, 2014.

29 Author's interview with Indian government official, October-November 2015.

30 Author's interview with Indian government official, December 4, 2015.



Trains are one method proposed to increase connectivity between SAARC member countries.
Photo credit: Ryan/Flickr.

governments that are politically favorable for India and that have promoted stronger bilateral relationships with it. In addition, Prime Minister Modi has made the South Asia region central in his foreign policy. This is, thus, the optimal time for facilitating cooperation in SAARC through a two-pronged approach: bypass Pakistan while maintaining engagement and promote subregional groupings within SAARC. The authors, therefore, make the following recommendations:

Continue and expand the “SAARC minus 1” strategy

India has been doing this so far in order to overcome the India-Pakistan dilemma. This strategy simply means engaging India’s neighbors without engaging Pakistan. The India-Pakistan relationship is a unique relationship and the problems that it faces are unique. Although it would be unrealistic to expect a quick resolution of the thorniest of political disputes between India and Pakistan, a steady level of engagement between the civilian leadership of both countries must be maintained.

Push for subregional groupings within SAARC

For example, this has been somewhat initiated with the motor vehicles agreement between Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, which allows for smooth transfers of passengers and cargo vehicles between the three countries. Similar agreements could be expanded to areas such as people-to-people connectivity, transit, and, related to this, culture and tourism, which offer immense opportunities.

Improve visa facilitation in the region

India and Sri Lanka permit each other’s citizens electronic travel authorizations. These are short-term travel e-visas that Indian travelers to Sri Lanka may apply for without a passport or document copies, and Sri Lankan travelers may apply for with uploaded passport copies and photos. The visa restrictions between Bangladesh and India are more rigid—requiring Bangladeshis to appear in person at the Indian consulate, and Indians to provide original passports and proof of employment to Bangladeshi

consulates. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are among the top sources of foreign tourists to India.³¹ Amending current visa policies to include visas-on-arrival would further boost tourism.

Strengthen cooperation on transit

India and Bangladesh recently agreed to start a bus service between Kolkata, Dhaka, and Agartala. For the first time, two Indian states are being linked by road through Bangladesh. India has also helped Sri Lanka relaunch and complete train services in Jaffna and Talaimannar Pier (the closest point to India) and has begun talks on a sea bridge and tunnel. Expanding subgroup cooperation on road, rail, and bridge connectivity projects offers a fertile avenue for cooperation. While talks have begun on resuming ferry services between Sri Lanka and India (Rameswaram-

Talaimannar and Colombo-Tutticorin), ferry/cruise services should also be started between Sri Lanka, Eastern India, and Bangladesh.

Boost cultural exchanges

At the height of the India-Soviet Union relationship, one of the regular highlights was the annual cultural festival of each country in the other's capital. Indians were able to watch the Bolshoi Theatre perform in New Delhi, for example. Some cultural exchanges between South Asian countries have been initiated. For example, in 2015, India held Sangam, a festival of India, in Sri Lanka. SAARC can foster more of these exchanges and help make them an annual feature in the region.

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31 "Bangladeshi Tourists Contribute to Growth of Indian Economy," bdnews24.com, December 11, 2015, <http://bdnews24.com/life-style/2015/11/11/bangladeshi-tourists-contribute-to-growth-of-indian-economy>.

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